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Prologue

Rain fell hard against the forest floor, the usual cover of leaves almost completely gone in the change of seasons. For a while, the drumming of the downpour and the occasional thunder clap were all that could be heard echoing through the shadowy woods. That was until the sound of mewling split through the air. Through the undergrowth, a lynx point queen stalked. A young kit was dangling from her jaws, fussing from the uncomfortable sensation of rain soaking its downy fur. The lone she-cat had traveled far beyond her territory, on a mission to bring her kitten to a set destination. There was a cat who lived within this forest who would be happy to meet it. Someone who would be better suited to care for this kit than she was.

Warily, the molly traveled through the moistened leaf litter, ears swiveling and alert to every sound. Her instincts were sharp, and her will to flee stronger. But the she-cat had to press on for the safety of this kit. The territory she was on was dangerous, owned by an enemy clan. And though she was exempt from rivalry, a warrior would not hesitate to pounce on her should they catch her prowling around without permission. The molly was well aware of the risk she was taking coming here, especially in the rain. And with a young kit no less. But she had to do this. She couldn't bare to keep this kitten any longer. It was too painful, too much of a reminder of the mistakes she had made.

A scent suddenly stopped the she-cat in her journey. She glanced at a row of blackthorn bushes ahead in the darkness, illuminated by a flash of lightning streaking across the late night sky. The smell was coming from just past them. It was one of familiarity, one the she-cat knew very well. *Treeclan*. She wondered how she was going to get inside the camp that lay just behind the thorny wall.

Before she could figure out a solution to her problem though, the she-cat first had to hide the kit. The lynx point molly turned around and walked away from the bushes in search of a hiding spot. Nearby, she could see a hollowed out a maple tree, the perfect size to store her precious cargo. Carefully, the molly approched and slipped her kit inside the hole, promising to return soon with a

friend. The kit let out a tiny cry, its tiny body trembling. In response the molly purred, licking the kit a few times to help settle it down. Once it was quiet, she hurried to where she came from. Back by the bushes, the she-cat began to walk around barrier, looking for the camp entrance. She came across an elm tree which reeked of clan scent. This had to be the way in. The tree's low branches made easy access for any skilled climber to come and go. But the she-cat wouldn't dare attempt to go through there. She was a terrible climber. And it wasn't like she could just walts into the heart of Treeclan unannounced. She would have to find another way to reach the cat she'd come to see.
Turning, the she-cat continued along the outside of the blackthorn barrier, thinking of a new solution to her problem. Maybe she could sneak in? Or perhaps it would be easier to find a guard and ask them to bring the cat she was looking for out?
Suddenly, a new smell met her nose a few paces onward, one even more familiar to her. Excitement flooded her senses and she carelessly rushed towards it. On the other side of the thinned out blackthorns she saw a familiar gray pelt. She hesitated a moment before meowing out for him.
"Wolfheart!"
At the sound of his name, the tom's attention turned barrier, eyes flashing green in the darkness. He stared for an extra moment before turning away, only to return a heartbeat later, gracefully leaping from a tree. He stood tall in front of the she-cat, head held high. His usual long flowing coat was soggy from the rain, clinging to his sides revealing him to be thinner than normal. Leaf-fall was coming to a close, giving way to a harsh Leafbare. It was clear to see the tom was already suffering from it.

"What are you doing here?" Wolfheart hissed, his voice harsh and low. The she-cat took a step closer to him. Her eyes were shining with hope.

"I need to show you something. Come with me," the molly insisted. Wolfheart hesitated a moment as she began to walk off. The molly looked back at him, beckoning him with a wave of her plumed tail. In response, Wolfheart let out a soft sign then padded after her to the hollow tree. The she-cat poked her head back into the tree's trunk, retrieving her kit. Then she turned around and dropped it at

Wolfheart's paws as gently as she could. Wolfheart blinked down at the tiny scrap in front of him, clearly confused.
"She's yours," the lynx-point molly told him, her voice monotone.
Wolfheart bent down to sniff at the kit. He nudged her gently with his muzzle, causing her to stir. The kitten let out a tiny squeal, attempting to lift her head. She wiggled in Wolfheart's direction, seeking refuge once more from the rain. Sympathetically, he cupped the kit with his paw, guiding her and pressing her against his warm belly.

"Snowfrost, where have you been all this time?" He asked, temporarily ignoring the kit.
Snowfrost growled, averting his steady green gaze. For a moment, she was silent.

"...why do you care?"

"Because I still care about you," he responded, sitting down on the damp, leaf littered ground. "Don't you know about what's been going on for the past moon and a half?"
Snowfrost narrowed her eyes, lashing her tail, but she did not respond.
"I told Blazestar about our affair. I told my whole clan about it. I was made an apprentice again," Wolfheart meowed, his green eyes brimming with sadness.

"You're an apprentice..?" She gasped, her eyes snapping back to look at the tom with astonishment. Wolfheart shook his head.

"I was just made a warrior again yesterday. I went through so much humiliation. But I did it all for you, and our children. After the Warriorpaw ceremony, I left. I went to Grassclan to help you raise our kits. But when I got there, Whitestar told me you had gone. She said you were on a journey to reconnect with Starclan. But I know that had to have been a lie. Where did you go?"

Snowfrost lowered her ears, staring at Wolfheart for a moment before parting her jaws to speak. "I went to Twolegplace. I did what you told me to," she mewed softly. "Our kits are in the care of the Twolegs now. I realized you were right. It's for their own good. *Our* own good. I left to live in Twolegplace long enough to have the kits.

But I couldn't bare to leave all of them." She stepped forward, nudging the kit closer to him.
"She reminded me a lot of you. I wanted her to meet her father." Snowfrost gave the little kit a few licks before stepping away. "Please, Wolfheart. Take her." She stared at the grey and white tom, blue eyes pleading. She didn't want to have to see this kit anymore, to look into her face and see her father. Snowfrost knew the kit would be better off in Treeclan, Starclan only knew how the rest of her litter was going to be treated. Wolfheart stared at Snowfrost only for a moment before glancing down at the kit.

"I'll take her," he finally decided. Snowfrost trilled, bumping her forehead against his in gratitude before stepping back again.

"Thank you. I know this kit will be in good paws," she sighed. "She is all yours now, Wolfheart, I won't interfere in her life. I know where my place is. I'm a medicine cat, not a mother..." Snowfrost glanced away. She wouldn't let Wolfheart see how much this decision upset her, despite how her heart ached.

"Regardless of whether or not you want to be a part of this kit's life, my clan would never allow you to be. And that's because of the mistakes we've made. So, if I can help it, the clan will never know that this kit wasn't Treeclan born at all." As if to prove his vow, Wolfheart bent his head down to groom the kit's fur backwards. In return the kit purred appreciatively, leaning into the warrior's warmth. A loving gaze glowed in the tom's pale green eyes, and Snowfrost looked reassured by the knowledge that Wolfheart would be an excellent father to their kit.
"It's almost morning, the warriors will be rousing soon. They won't take kindly to you wandering onto Treeclan territory," Wolfheart suddenly warned. Snowfrost's ears pricked, head tilting upward to look at the sky. On the horizon the very faintest amount of light began to shine from behind the thick gray storm clouds. Heaving another sigh, it seemed that Snowfrost realized it was time to say goodbye. She stepped up to Wolfheart, touching her nose to his. Wolfheart looked into her eyes as he stood back and picked up the kit. He allowed Snowfrost to come forward again to touch noses with her daughter for the last time. Snowfrost's eyes watered a little at the knowledge that though she may see this little bundle again

someday-all grown up-the kit would never know her true origins. But Snowfrost knew it was for the best. She couldn't have this kit around to act as a perfect reminder of failed relationship. Nor did she want her to suffer the same fate her littermates would. Standing tall, Snowfrost turned around, stealing one last glance of two Treeclan cats before running off into the storm.

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Holding his newly discovered daughter, Wolfheart jumped down from the Entrance Tree and headed straight for the nursery. He took one look up at the sky, noticing the clouds slowly beginning to dissipate before he started to slip between the parted roots which led to the den. Carefully he ducked his head beneath the low trunk of the tree, padding down the slope into the secluded shelter. Wolfheart paused for a moment to allow his eyes to adjust to the darkness. Then he weaved his way around numerous sleeping bodies, only setting once he came upon the resting form of his maye, Brightsky. He nudged her head with his muzzle, dropping the kit he'd been carrying gently in front of her. The kit let out a surprised squeak as it touched the soft moss, finally rousing the sleeping she-cat. Groggily Brightsky opened her eyes to be greeted with the sight of the strange, soggy, mewling kitten. Her ears perked as she looked down at the fluffy grey and white bundle at her paws.

"A kit...? Where did it come from?" Brightsky mewed quietly, so as not to wake any of the queens or kits who took up residence in the nursery with her.

"I found Snowfrost wandering in the woods. She brought the kit to me and said the others are at Twolegplace now. She wanted at least one of the litter to be clan raised," he responded softly. Brightsky turned her head to look at her mate, blue eyes glowing in the darkness, before turning her muzzle down towards the kitten.

"Such a shame. She's a very beautiful kit. Looks just like you, Wolfheart. Though it wouldn't be traditional, does she have a name?"

"No," the grey and white tom responded, flicking his tail. "I don't

think she named any of them. She was probably afraid of growing attached. But, then again, I didn't ask..."
Brightsky let out a small *"hmm,"* in reply. She leaned her head down more to groom the kitten who purred in response to her warm tongue rasping over her fluffy downy pelt. Slowly, the rain was licked off of her, her pelt becoming more fluffy as it dried. A calm silence overcame the nursery, only the sounds of purring and heavy rhythmic breathing could be made out in the inky blackness.
"So..." Wolfheart said, breaking the silence. "Will you raise her?"
Brightsky paused grooming the kit to look up at him.

"Of course. I would never turn a kit in need away."
Gently she guided the little kitten over to her belly where she snuggled up between four other tiny bundles. The kit's eyelids bunched, as if trying to open and peer out at the world.

"She looks about ready to open her eyes," Brightsky noted, her tail-tip twitching slowly.

Wolfheart took notice of that too, nodding in agreement. He never asked how long it had been since Snowfrost kitted. But he knew it had to have been a few days ago, in order for her to be fit enough to travel back from Twolegplace.
"Maybe Snowfrost waited a while before deciding to bring her here."

"Maybe." Brightsky hummed, grooming the kit some more, willing her to fall asleep. It was easy to take notice of the size difference between the kittens laying in the nest. Brightsky's litter had only been born hours ago; their fur was still thin and sticky from their journey from the womb. While Snowfrost's kit had to have been born about three or four days before, with her coat already fluffy and her ears perking ever so slightly. Despite this, Wolfheart sighed and purred will relief, nuzzling Brightsky affectionately. He laid down next to his mate, watching his five sleepy kittens cuddle together againt Brightsky's white and black patched belly. Joy and love filled his heart, bringing him big hopes for their future.

"She fits in well. It's as if we never lost Silentkit in the first place," he mewed. Brightsky looked at Wolfheart, seriousness darkening her gaze.

"Though she was stillborn, I love my little Silentkit. This kit will never be able to replace the one we lost. But she does fill the nest quite nicely. I will love her just as I did Silentkit, and as I do my living kits. I will love her because she is yours, and because her mother cannot raise her. *I* will be her mama, and she will call no other as such." Pain laced the queen's voice as she talked about her dead kit then love replaced it as she turned her gaze down to her new daughter. Wolfheart purred louder, rasping his tongue over his mate's cheek.

"You are so compassionate. This is one of the many reasons why I love you."

"I know, you big fuzzball," Brightsky mewed playfully, nudging him with her chin. "You need to go get ready for the dawn patrol. I'm sure Thornberry is expecting you. Try to get some sleep after you get back." Wolfheart nodded and rose to his paws. He bent down to give each of his kittens a lick, then ran his tongue between Brightsky's ears affectionately. He padded carefully towards the mouth of the den, pausing momentary to watch his mate settle back down and fall asleep, before he slipped out of the nursery and into the new, warm light of dawn.

Allegiances

*(Cats with * by theor gender are transgender)*

TREECLAN:

Leader: Blazestar- ginger and white tom with orange eyes

Deputy: Thornberry- long haired blackish-brown tom with a nubby tail and yellow eyes

Medicine Cat: Mothsong- pretty calico she-cat with orange eyes and a ginger moth shaped patch on her white chest

Code Keeper *(a cat who helps keep law and order)*: Cardinaltail- fluffy white tom with 2 ginger patches on his head, a fluffy ginger tail and odd eyes (one yellow and one blue)

Warriors: *(fully trained cats without kits)*

Wolfheart- long-haired grey tom with a white chest, paws, and tail tip, and green eyes (*Apprentice: Nightpaw*)

Brackentooth- dark tabby molly with amber eyes

Robinspots- spotted tom with yellow eyes

Shadeleaf- beautiful torbie she-cat with green eyes

Pepperpatch- white and black patched she cat with green eyes

Bluefang- blue-grey tom with green eyes

Spruceleap- light brown tabby and white tom with amber eyes (*Apprentice: Fogpaw*)

Darkfire- chimera tortoiseshell she-cat with a half ginger half black face and amber eyes

Beetlenose- black spotted smoked tom with odd eyes (one blue and one green) (*Apprentice: Leopardpaw*)

Shroompelt- white tom with dark brown tabby patches and yellow eyes

Thrushmask- Light brown she-cat with siamese points and amber eyes

Sagetail- briwn she-cat with dark siamese points and yellow eyes (*Apprentice: Batpaw*)

Galestorm- dark grey she-cat with lighter silver patches, chest and neck fur, and tail, white paws, and yellow-green eyes

Greytuft- long-haired grey tabby she-cat* with pale yellow eyes

Oakfur- Long haired dark brown tom with fluffy lighter colored chest fur and amber eyes (*Apprentice: Meadowpaw*)

Flamepath- ginger she-cat with unusual blue eyes (*Apprentice: Emberpaw*)

Apprentices: *(cats six moons old or older, in training)*

Fogpaw- long-haired grey smoke tom with yellow eyes

Meadowpaw- golden she-cat with unusual blue eyes

Emberpaw- pretty dilute calico she-cat with yellow-green eyes

Leopardpaw- black spotted smoke tom with green eyes

Nightpaw- long haired black she-cat with fluffy neck fur and unusual blue eyes

Batpaw- long haired black she-cat with odd eyes (one blue and one green)

Queens:

Den Mother ("leader" of the queens): Sweetclaw- pale ginger she-cat with amber eyes

Brightsky- white and black patched she-cat with unusual blue eyes (mother of Wolfheart's kits: Smokekit [long-haired grey smoke tomkit with fluffy light grey neck fur and green eyes], Magpiekit [long-haired white and black patched mollykit with green eyes], Rainkit [white and gray patched mollykit with blue eyes], Skunkkit [unusual black and white tomkit with blue eyes], and Moonkit [long-haired silver and white mollykit with green eyes])

Leafheart- ginger and white she-cat with a ginger heart shaped patch on her white chest and green eyes. (Mother of Blazestar's kits: Adderkit [ginger and white tomkit with orange eyes], Flamekit [ginger tom with white underbelly and toes and orange eyes], Foxkit [ginger tomkit with a white patch on his chest and green eyes], and Sunkit [ginger and white tomkit with green eyes])

Speckleface- beautiful long-haired mostly brown tabby tortoiseshell she-cat with a white underchin and chest and yellow eyes (Mother of Robinspots' kits: Tigerkit [long-haired dark brown tabby and white mollykit with yellow eyes], Deerkit [long-haired dark brown tabby tomkit with a white underbelly and toes and yellow eyes], Berrykit [long-haired brown tabby tomkit with darker brown stripes and yellow eyes], Sparrowkit [brown spotted tomkit with yellow eyes], and Tinykit [dilute, mostly lilac tortoiseshell mollykit with yellow eyes])

Silverhawk- long haired silver tabby she-cat with black swirling stripes and yellow eyes (Mother of Thornberry's kits: Beekit [long-haired silver tabby mollykit with swirling black stripes, yellow eyes, and a nubby tail] and Blackkit [long-haired black tomkit with yellow eyes and a nubby tail])

Mapleshine- pretty calico she-cat with green eyes (mate of Brackentooth, expecting kits)

Elders: *(cats who are retired from their duties)*

Badgerface- once handsome black and white tom with orange eyes and a scarred muzzle

Elmfoot- tabby tom with white paws and amber eyes

Daisypetal- pale ginger she-cat

OCEANCLAN

Leader: Wavestar- long haired grey tabby tom with white chest fur, front paws, and back legs and yellow eyes

Deputy: Sandybreeze- long haired golden she-cat with orange eyes

Medicine Cat: Curlear- hairless tom with greyish-pink fuzz/skin and yellow eyes (*Apprentice: Bluesky*)

Code Keeper: Sharktooth- black and white tom with green eyes

Warriors:

Sandclaw- handsome pale golden tom with a plumed tail and yellow-green eyes

Minnowjaw- long haired brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Kinkfoot- long haired brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes and a twisted back paw

Shellsplash- brown tabby she-cat with green eyes

Duneshine- long haired mostly ginger tortoiseshell tabby tom* with amber eyes

Ripplesnout- dark brown tabby tom with dark green eyes (*Apprentice: Shimmerpaw*)

Puddlefur- long haired black and white tom with yellow eyes

Scallopfall- dark ginger and white tom with amber eyes

Silverdrop- silver black spotted tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Sunnystream- white and ginger patched she-cat with orange eyes

Bellapool- dark brown tabby she-cat with a sliced ear and green eyes (*Apprentice: Precious*)

Luckysong- white and ginger patched tom with blue eyes

Seaweedfang- fluffy brown tabby she-cat with an injured front paw and amber eyes (*Apprentice: Samson*)

Troutwhisker- long haired grey smoke she-cat with amber eyes

Splashcreek- blue-grey tom with yellow-green eyes

Dimpath- pretty pale ginger she-cat with a snaggletooth and brown eyes

Lilypad- pretty white and brown dappled she-cat with blue eyes

Finnclaw- silver tom with black spots and brown eyes

Driftbreath- brown tom with black spots and brown eyes

Clamleg- long haired grey tabby tom with orange eyes

Apprentices:

Precious- marbled siamese she-cat with blue eyes

Samson- long haired dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Shimmerpaw- black smoke she-cat with yellow eyes

Bluesky- long haired blue-grey tom with blue eyes, medicine cat apprentice

Queens:

Den Mother: Richfur- pale ginger tom with orange eyes

Eelnose- long haired ginger and white she-cat with yellow eyes (Mother of Scallopfall's kit: Hazekit [pure white long haired tomkit with yellow eyes])

Gullcry- grey and white tom with amber eyes (Father of Spiderfang of Mountainclan's kit: Urchinkit [black tomkit with spikey fur and yellow-green eyes])

Beckycreek- dark grey and white tabby she-cat with yellow-green eyes [Mother of Wavestar's kits: Whisperkit [dark grey tabby mollykit with lighter chest fur, a folded ear and green eyes], Currentkit [long haired white tom with a grey tabby patch on his forehead, a grey tabby tail, and yellow eyes], and Stonekit [dark grey tabby and white patched mollykit with yellow eyes]. As well as a newborn litter by Luckysong: Duck-kit [silver grey tabby mollykit*] and Turtlekit [torbie mollykit])

Elders

Tunafin- silver tabby tom with yellow eyes

Dolphintail- blind grey molly with foggy yellow eyes

Oystersplash- long haired grey tabby tom with amber eyes and a half tail

Chloe- pale ginger she-cat with white paws and yellow eyes

GRASSCLAN

Leader: Whitestar- chocolate siamese she-cat with a plumed tail and blue eyes

Deputy: Chicorynose- fluffy fawn colored she-cat with pale green eyes and a plumed tail

Medicine Cats: Snowfrost- silver lynx point she-cat with a plumed tail and blue eyes

Goldensong- pale ginger and white she-cat with a white spot on the vrudge of her nose and pale green eyes

Code Keeper: Dewstone- white she-cat with silver-grey patches and blue eyes

Warriors:

Tigerfang- tabby tom with amber eyes

Snailear- white tom with ginger patches and mix matched eyes (one

green and one blue)

Waspwing- dark ginger tom with amber eyes (*Apprentice: Heatherpaw*)

Ambereye- pale ginger she-cat with amber eyes

Gingerstrike- ginger tom with amber eyes

Sheeptail- white tom with odd curly fur and blue eyes. He is hard of hearing

Cowpatch- white tom with cinnamon patches and green eyes

Ryestep- greyish- brown tom with amber eyes

Cloverpetal- calico she-cat with yellow-green eyes (*Apprentice: Quailpaw*)

Smokesnout- black tom with with yellow-green eyes

Rosebloom- albino spotted she-cat with lightblue eyes

Apprentices:

Quailpaw- pretty brown tabby she-cat with brown eyes

Heatherpaw- lilac she-cat with brown eyes

Queens:

Den Mother: Ashwhisker- Dilute tortishell tom* with green eyes [Father of Smokesnout's kit: Shadowkit [black tomkit with green eyes. Foster father of Otterkit [lithe brown she-cat with yellow eyes])

Jaybird- silver tabby she-cat with blue eyes (Mate of Ambereye; Foster mother of: Frostkit [long-haired silver and white tabby mollykit with green eyes], Rabbitkit [long haired lynx point tomkit with white paws and blue eyes], and Mistykit [long haired silver grey mollykit with pale green eyes])

Cricketsong- light brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes (expecting

Cowpatch's kits)

Elders:

Boulderfall- dark brown tom with a grey muzzle and green eyes

Tornface- white tom with a huge scar from the tip of his torn right ear to the bottom left of his chin

Meadowcall- dark ginger she-cat with yellow-green eyes

Poppycloud- dark ginger she-cat with orange eyes

MOUNTAINCLAN

Leader: Fogstar- long haired silver tom with a dark grey tail and pale blue eyes

Deputy: Bearclaw- long haired smoke tom with orange eyes

Medicine Cat: Hawkfern- long haired, mostly grey dilute tortoiseshell she-cat with orange eyes

Code Keeper: Rockfall- long haired dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Warriors:

Frozenflight- long haired white tom with pale green eyes

Needlethorn- long haired pale tabby tom with yellow eyes

Galecall- long haired black and white she-cat with yellow-green eyes (*Apprentice: Cougarpaw*)

Jaggedtalon- dark brown long haired tom with lighter chest fur, a white spot in the middle of his chest, and amber eyes

Alderwing- long haired mostly brown and black tortoiseshell she-cat with yellow-green eyes

Icefeather- long haired white she-cat with blue eyes. she is mostly deaf and mute

Shrubdapple- long haired white tom with splashes of brown on his pelt and blue eyes. he is blind

Badgerstorm- black and white long haired tom with a white stripe splitting the middle of his face and yellow-green eyes

Lizardtail- long haired grey and white tom with brown eyes

Blizzardtooth- long haired silver tabby tom with green eyes

Ebonymask- long haired black she-cat with amber eyes (*Apprentice: Foxpaw*)

Kestrelshine- long haired dark brown and white she-cat with amber eyes

Dustpuddle- long haired brown tom with amber eyes

Slatestep-long haired pure black tom with orange eyes

Spiderfang- long haired dusty black she-cat with an underbite and amber eyes

Adderstrike- long haired dark brown tabby tom with a white chest and one amber eye and one blue eye

Briarleaf- long haired brown tabby and white she-cat with yellow-green eyes

Toadsong- long haired grey tom with yellow eyes

Twigbelly- long haired dusty brown tom with amber eyes

Lightningstrike- long haired grey she-cat with orange eyes, a white chest, and an odd white lightning shaped fur marking going diagonally from the top left of her head down to the bottom right of her chin connecting with her chest fur

Shrewnose- long haired smokey black tom with yellow-green eyes and a white spot on the bridge of his nose

Ravencall- black and white long haired she-cat with green eyes

Breezeheart- long haired white molly with her tail and half her face a light brown color and blue eyes (*Apprentice: Pinepaw*)

Talonstrike-aging long haired siamese tom with blue eyes

Apprentices:

Cougarpaw- long haired light brown tabby tom with yellow eyes

Foxpaw- dusty brown long haired tom with a white muzzle and amber eyes

Pinepaw- light brown she-cat with amber eyes

Queens:

Den Mother: Vulturetuft- long haired white she-cat* with brown patches and amber eyes (Foster Mother of Skykit [long haired silver and white mollykit])

Curlflower- long haired lavender she-cat with folded ears and yellow eyes (Mother of Fogstar's kit: Dark-kit [long haired dark grey and white tomkit])

Spottedear- mostly black tortoiseshell she-cat with orange eyes (Mother of Rockfall's kit: Eaglekit [mostly black long haired tortoiseshell mollykit]

Elders:

Cheetawhisker- long hair spotted tabby she-cat with tufts on her ears, a greying muzzle, and one brown eye (the other is missing)

Caracaltuft- long hair light brown tom with tufts on his ears, a greying muzzle, and brown eyes

MARSHCLAN

Leader: Littlestar- old, mostly brown tabby tortoiseshell tom* with short legs and amber eyes

Deputy: Brightbounce-beautiful flame point she-cat with blue eyes

Medicine Cat: Swanface- siamese she-cat with blue eyes

Code Keeper: Swallowtail- brown and white tom with orange eyes

Warriors:

Morningrose- beautiful pale golden tabby she-cat with white toes and chest fur and brown eyes (*Apprentice: Stempaw*)

Pricklethorn- brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Mudsplash- mostly brown tortoiseshell and white molly with amber eyes (*Apprentice: Sedgepaw*)

Frogfrost- brown tabby she-cat with brown eyes

Cranetooth- white and brown tabby patched tom with brown eyes

Gooseflight- dark brown spotted tabby tom with white chest fur, underbelly, and toes and brown eyes

Snake-eye- dark brown tabby she-cat with one amber eye (the other is permanently closed due to a snake bite) (*Apprentice: Spiderpaw*)

Violetpool- pale ginger and white patched she-cat with green eyes

Reedstorm- grey tabby tom with green eyes

Fernfeather- calico she-cat with green eyes

Apprentices:

Spiderpaw- - brown smoke tom with a white chest and paws and yellow eyes

Stempaw- dark grey tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Sedgepaw- black spotted tom with a lighter underbelly and amber eyes

Queens:

Den Mother: Lotusfang- pure white she-cat with black patches and

brown eyes

Hemlockshade- silver and white she-cat with yellow-green eyes (Mother of Pricklethorn's kits: Willowkit [blue-grey mollykit] and Dragonflykit [brown tabby tom with darker brown stripes])

Littlebird- golden and white patched she-cat with brown eyes

Elders:

Flyear- black tom with a white chin, chest fur, and paws, and yellow eyes

Lionclaw- once handsome golden tabby tom with brown eyes

Loonfoot-mostly black tom with a white underbelly and paws and pale yellow eyes

Toadwhisker- brown tabby tom with green eyes. He is half deaf

CATS OUTSIDE THE CLANS:

Oliver- Purebred sorrel Somai tom with amber eyes and a purple collar

Misty- Silver-grey tabby she-cat with green eyes and a bumblebee collar. Lives in Twolegplace as a kittypet

Hana- white and black patched Japanese Bobtail mollykit with mix-matched colored legs (front right and back left are black and the others are white), blue eyes, and a nubby black tail. Wears a red collar around her neck

Mako- White tom with a black patch on his head, a fully black tail, and grey-blue eyes. Loner, lives in a barn on Grassclan territory

Chapter 1

Moonkit scrambled to the side of the nursery on her tiny kitten legs. Her paws barely touched the ground as she skidded across the earth. She whipped her head around looking for a good place to hide herself before she was caught. A fox-length away, one of her denmates was busy counting, their tiny voice echoing inside the hollow tree.
"..five, six, seven..."
Moonkit looked back at the kit, wiggling her whole body with excitement. Today they had chosen to play hide-and-seek, a favorite game of any Treeclan cat. Moonkit was determined to win, deciding already that she was the best hider of all the nursery residents. But in order to prove that, she'd actually have to find a spot to stash herself. By the wall, Sweetclaw the Den Mother was napping in her nest. Thick moss surrounded her cream colored body, and Moonkit bet there was enough there to provide her some good coverage. Quickly she dived down under the nest, covering herself in the soft moss and hoped nobody would notice. Moonkit pricked her ears, listening closely as Tigerkit finished counting.

"...sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, aaand twenty! Ready or not here I come!" She squeaked. Moonkit giggled quietly, covering her mouth with her paws. She listened carefully to her surroundings, trying to figure out where the other kitten was. One by one, Moonkit's denmates were found, each squealing or meeping when their hiding spot was discovered. Moonkit felt confident that her hiding place was the best and that she'd be winning the game this time. Suddenly she felt a unexpected weight fall upon her. The little silver and white kit jolted, shrieking out in surprise.

"Gotcha!" Tigerkit squealed. Bursting from the moss, Moonkit whirled around to see the other standing in front of her, her feathery tail high in the air in triump. Moonkit pouted, all of her downy kitten fur standing on end. The other kit giggled. "Sorry, Moomoo," she mewed.

"You could have killed me, Tig!" Moonkit spat, trying to relax. Tigerkit just giggled at her again before bounding off to search for the last kit. Moonkit watched her friend with interest as the fluffy tabby and white molly searched the whole den. But Tigerkit seemed out of luck. The last kit, Moonkit's brother Skunkkit, was nowhere to be found. *Had he gone to hide outside the nursery?* Moonkit wondered.

"Ok, you can come out now. I can't find you, you win!" Tigerkit shouted in defeat, sitting down with her front paws between her legs. Two tail-lengths away, Moonkit heard some shuffling, followed by a loud yawn. She turned her head, smiling at the sight of her brother.

"What are you yowling about..?" The kit mewed from their shared nest.

"Skunkkit! You were asleep this who time?!" Tigerkit hissed. Skunkkit yawned again, stepping out of the nest with a stretch.

"Yeah. Why, were we doing something?" He asked, shaking out his pelt. Moonkit purred with amusement, catching the annoyed glint in Tigerkit's eyes. It wasn't fair that Skunkkit hadn't told anyone that he'd lost interest in the game, but Moonkit had to admit it was pretty funny her brother had won regardless. Tigerkit puffed up her fur, showing off her agitation.

"We were playing hide-and-seek, mouse-brain! I thought you were hiding so good I couldn't find you. But here you are taking a nap instead. You're as lazy as a kittypet and you're only four moons old," the tabby kit spat angrily. Skunkkit just groomed himself, uninterested. The rest of the kits who had been playing along with them all came tumbling over to greet and play with Skunkkit. Adderkit laughed at him, while Beekit tackled Skunkkit to the ground to cover him in licks. Deerkit merely shook his head and Flamekit made a remark that Moonkit didn't bother to listen to.

"Stop yowling already, I think they can hear you all the way over in Mountainclan," grumbled a larger mollykit. Moonkit whipped around to see the other kitten standing by the den's entrance, her blue eyes seeming to glow within her shadow. Her long black fur

was fluffed with annoyance, her tail kicking up a small cloud of dust as it wagged. Tigerkit stuck her tongue out at her rudely.

"Go chase your tail, Nightkit!" She sneered. "You need the practice."

"Shut up you little rat," Nightkit snarled. Tigerkit growled and dropped to a mock crouch, ready to attack the older kit. A fluffy smoke colored tomkit jumped in the way to intervene. It was Smokekit, Moonkit's other brother. The fluffy tom was usually the peacekeeper among their denmates. He always hated when kits would quarrel.

"Stop it you guys!" He mewed.

"Smokekit's right. You two need to stop arguing, it's getting annoying," Magpiekit, Moonkit's sister, joined in.
The two fighting kits glared at each other, never breaking eye contact despite the interuption. After another heartbeat, Tigerkit backed down. But it would seem Nightkit wasn't ready to give in. With a growl, the black kitten leapt for Tigerkit. Tigerkit gasped, dodging the attack, scrambling to get away. She headed towards the mouth of the nursery, only to have her path blocked by the other mollykit. Nightkit bared her teeth, unsheathing her claws. She raised a paw, ready to strike. Just then, an older cat arrived, grabbing her by the scruff. Darkfire, Nightkit's mother, lifted the kit from the ground, with Blackkit squeezing in between her legs. The older tortoiseshell she-cat did not look pleased in the slightest with the behavior of her kin. The other kits around the den snickered, Moonkit included.

"Tattletail!" hissed Nightkit to Blackkit. Beekit ran over to her brother, standing in front of him protectively. Darkfire carried the angry mollykit to their nest, dropping her inside and climbing in after her.

"Nightkit. This is not how a dignified soon-to-be warrior behaves. Do you want me to have your apprentice ceremony postponed?" She threatened. Nightkit gulped, flattening her ears, and mumbled a soft *"no"* in reply. Darkfire purred, leaning down to groom her kit, whispering something quietly into her ear. A little black spotted kit and a black kit with odd eyes came barrelling into the nursery,

diving into the nest next to their littermate, Nightkit.

"Leopardkit, Batkit, what's the rush?" Nightkit asked in surprise as her siblings settled at her side. Had they gotten into some trouble too when no one was looking?

"Beetlenose said we had to come in so mother could groom us. Blazestar will be calling us soon," respondes Batkit. Darkfire nodded in agreement, turning her attention to Leopardkit.
Moonkit's fur prickled with excitement. *An apprentice ceremony, how thrilling!*
From across the den, Moonkit heard her name being called. Happily she skipped over to join her group of friends.

"I can't wait to become an apprentice," Tigerkit was meowing as Moonkit arrived. The tabby's yellow eyes twinkled bright like stars. "I'm going to be the best warrior in Treeclan history!"

"Well I'm going to be the best hunter," proclaimed Magpiekit, elevating her head proudly, "just like mama and papa."

"I think I just want to learn," admitted Smokekit, shrugging nonchalantly. "I don't want to decide what I'll be until I see what I'm best at."

"That's a good idea," Moonkit chimed in, wrapping her fluffy tail around her paws neatly as she sat. "I think I'll wait too, and see how I feel when we're all warriors."
The young molly honestly didn't know what she wanted to do yet. The thought of being a warrior was nice, but she wasn't as excited about it at the others were. Perhaps she was odd in that regard. Then again the clan had many jobs a cat could do, so Moonkit wasn't limited in her options. Still, as of right now she didn't have a clue towards what she may choose.

"Let all cats old enough to travel through the trees gather here beneath the Great Stump for a clan meeting," called the clan leader, Blazestar, from outside. Instantly the camp became alive with activity. Everyone came to gather around the Great Stump. The dozen kits which crowded the nursery came spilling out to join the older cats and other kits, sitting with the queens by the den's

entrance. Moonkit sat with her siblings and mother, Brightsky, staring at the Great Stump with curiosity. She had never seen an apprentice ceremony take place before.
The last cats out of the nursery were Darkfire and her three kits, Nightkit, Batkit, and Leopardkit.
The queen nudged her nervous brood forward, her expression unreadable. It was odd; most queens would look proud or excited during a time like this. But Darkfire seemed as if she felt indifferently about the occasion. She was always an unusual cat, who showed little excitement for anything except battling or hunting. Everyone thought she'd at least show interest in her kits becoming apprentices. Even that, unfortunately, couldn't gain a reaction from her. Moonkit was grateful her parents weren't as unfeeling. In fact, Moonkit silently thanked Starclan that she wasn't born to Darkfire, feeling sympathy for the three kits who had been. They didn't deserve the treatment their mother gave them.
The crowd parted to allow the four cats to get through to the front where they were needed. Moonkit climbed onto her mom's back to get a better view of the area. On the sidelines near the front of the crowd she spotted her dad, Wolfheart. She smiled at the sight of him, happy to see that he was making strides to get closer to the rest of the clan. For as long as she could remember Wolfheart had always sat away from his clanmates, but she couldn't figure out why. Was he shy? Or had he done something wrong that she did not know of? Moonkit would never know. It wasn't her place to pry. And she knew her dad would explain if the time was right to.
Moonkit was suddenly pulled out from her thoughts by the voice of the clan leader.

"Today is a special day in a young cat's life, where a kit leaves the nursery and joins the world as an apprentice," Blazestar began, turning his attention to the four dark colored cats in front of him. "Darkfire, have your kits reached six moons old? And do you believe they are ready to join us and learn the ways of the clan?"

"Yes," replied Darkfire flatly.

"Are you ready to rejoin your peers as a warrior once more, or would you like to reside as a queen permanently?" asked Blazestar.

"I would like to return to my warrior duties," responded Darkfire

dryly, glaring up at her leader as if he had just insulted her. Blazestar returned her gaze with slight confusion. He blinked, breaking away his gaze for a moment and flicked his ear as if that would rid himself of the negative thoughts that might be swirling in his mind.

"Very well. Then with Starclan as witness, let it be known that from this day forward, this cat shall be recognized as a full warrior of Treeclan once more."

Darkfire scoffed quietly, waving her tail at the leader untraditionally as she turned around. She gave each of her kits one final lick before stepping back into the crowd with the warriors, glancing up at Blazestar with an odd, yet unreadable expression while twitching her tail-tip. Moonkit lowered her body closer to her mother's drawing comfort from her warmth and scent. *Darkfire sure is an intimidating cat.*

"Nightkit, Batkit, and Leopardkit, step forward," Blazestar commanded. The trio eagerly stepped forward, away from the crowd, walking at the same pace as one another. The excitement on their faces was obvious, even on the other side of camp.

"You have survived the first six moons of your life. May Starclan guide your paws from this moment on," Blazestar told the kits. "From this day forward, until they have earned their warrior names, these apprentices shall be known as the following: Leopardkit, from this point on you shall be known as Leopardpaw. Beetlenose, it's been some time since you've trained an apprentice. Teach Leopardpaw how to be the best warrior he can be."
Beetlenose emerged from the crowd to appear in front of the new apprentice, who happened to be his son. The toms were mirror images of one another in every way expect for height and eye color. Leopardpaw turned around to touch noses with the senior warrior happily before the two of them walked off to sit in the front of the crowd.
"Batkit, from this point on you shall be known as Batpaw. Sagetail, you will mentor this apprentice. Teach her well, help guide her paws on the path to becoming a great warrior," Blazestar continued. The little odd eyed cat stepped towards her new mentor to touch noses, the pair then walked off to join her brother and his mentor in

the crowd.
"And Nightkit, from this point on you shall be known as Nightpaw. Wolfheart, you did an excellent job training Shadeleaf, and have proven yourself to be trustworthy enough to train another apprentice. Guide this young cat's paws on the path to be a great warrior just as Thornberry and I have trained you," concluded Blazestar. Wolfheart stepped towards the front of the crowd to meet Nightpaw, touching noses with her. Nightpaw's bright blue eyes shined with admiration as she met with her new mentor. Wolfheart blinked slowly back at her in return. The clan erupted into cheers.

"Leopardpaw! Batpaw! Nightpaw! Leopardpaw! Batpaw! Nightpaw!"

Moonkit sort of envied Nightpaw. She had secretly hoped she'd get Wolfheart as her mentor when she'd be apprenticed. She adored her father and would have had fun training with him. But she was sure Blazestar would give her a great mentor when her time came. With the apprentice ceremony completed, the meeting was dismissed. Moonkit decided to head to the elder's den to share tongues with Badgerface now that there was nothing else going on. She ran to the bramble covered pile of tree branches where the elders lived. There, she found Badgerface, an old black and white tom, sitting outside sunning himself with Daisypetal. Upon seeing her Badgerface lit up, sitting up to look at the fluffy little silver and white kitten.

"Hello, Moonkit," he purred with a soft blink.

Moonkit beamed up at him, "Hi Badgerface! Can I sunbathe and share tongues with you please?" She asked politely. Badgerface purred louder.

"Of course," he trilled. Moonkit wasted no time marching up to the old tom, plopping herself down between his front paws.

"Can you tell me a story pleeeease?" She begged, looking up at him with round eyes. Moonkit adored listening to the elders' stories. They were always so entertaining and inspiring to her.

"Of course! Let's see now, what to tell. Hmm...Would you like to hear the story of The Fox and the Queen?" Badgerface asked. Moonkit's green eyes lit up.

"Yes!" She squealed, snuggling down to get more comfortable, pricking her ears. Badgerface chuckled and began telling his tale.

"There once was a she-cat named Ladybug-"

"Ladybug?" Moonkit interuppted with a giggle. "That's a silly name!"

"I suppose it is." Badgerface turned his muzzle downward to groom his little companion's head. "Ladybug was a caring molly, with pretty tortoiseshell fur. She adored kits of all kinds- and apparently of all species. She could never bring herself to hunt or harm a baby animal. This love increased when she one day became a queen. She adore her kits to bits, but soon found herself overwhelmed by them. For you see, this young queen had given birth to a litter of eight kittens."

"Eight whole kits?!" Moonkit gasped. She thought a litter of five was huge-she should know, she was one of five- but eight was just crazy. Moonkit could only imagine how crowded the nursery must have been with those eight kittens *plus* any others who took up residence in the den.

"Yes. Eight kits. As you can imagine, Ladybug found herself needing some space. So whenever her kits slept, she would leave camp to take a walk alone in the forest. One day during her walk, she heard the cries of a young animal. Her strong maternal instincts kicked in, driving her towards the baby in distressed. She peered through a bush to see a very young fox kit struggling alone in a clearing. Quickly she ran to the kit's side. She sniffed it and noticed no presence of milk scent on its fur- or any scent of a parent for that matter. Sympathy swelled in her heart, compelling her to pick up the little fox kit and carry it to safety. She found a hollow log near a stream where any scent of the fox would be concealed by the swampy stink of the bank. There, she left the kit. She knew this fox kit had to only be a few days old, and she knew if she would abandon it here it would starve to death. Even though she knew it would be seen as treacherous to help the little creature, Ladybug could not pull herself away from a kit in need.
So, she fed the baby fox until it was so full it fell asleep. Content that it had a full belly, Ladybug left for a while to find some moss to make a nest with. She returned and wrapped up the kit in the moss'

soft warmth before heading back home to her clan where she fed and cared for her own kits. For moons she continued to do this. During the day she would take care of her own kits, and when they would sleep, she would leave camp to take care of the fox kit. 'The fox was blind and deaf when I found him. Surely he will never bring any harm to me or my family, since I am the one who raised him,' she reasoned with herself every time she left to visit her fox." Badgerface used his best storytelling voice as he spoke, imitating the voice of a she-cat when repeating what Ladybug was assumed to say. It made Moonkit giggle; this old tom had a deep gravely voice, listening to him attempt to imitate such a delicate voice was silly. "Ladybug felt so fondly for the little creature, as if he were one of her own litter. She watched him grow from a tiny, helpless scrap of fur into a tall, lanky beast. Ladybug's heart swelled with pride the day her fox kit left the hollow log on his own, though part of her was sad. She knew the fox would always remember her for her deed, but she couldn't help but miss him when he was gone. Some day she hoped to see him again.

One day, Ladybug was on a border patrol with one of her kits-who was now an apprentice-, her mate, and the clan deputy. The four cats split up to cover more ground. Ladybug was busy stalking through some tall grass when she heard a blood curdling shriek come from her kit in the opposite direction. She hurried over to where the commotion came from to find her kit laying on the ground, dead. Her neck was ripped open, gushing blood all over the earth. Standing above the apprentice's body was a large fox. Ladybug's mate and the clan deputy quickly arrived, and together the three cats charged at the fox. The two warriors attacked the fox's back and underbelly while Ladybug rushed at its face. But just as she was about to strike- she paused. She'd recognize that face anywhere. This was the fox she had raised for all those moons. Ladybug froze in place, watching the fight unfold. The fox managed to overpower the two cats, killing Ladybug's mate and sending the deputy fleeing back to camp to fetch backup. Ladybug quickly found herself all alone with her fox. She stood in front of the bodies of her dead loved ones, staring right into the eyes of the fox. Though they stared at each other for a while, the fox did not move to attack the brave queen.

'How could you..?" Ladybug sobbed, drawing her lips back in a snarl. The fox took a few steps closer to her, licking his lips to clean

them of cat blood.
'How could you do this to me? I raised you as if you were one of my own!' she yowled. The fox merely stared at her for another heartbeat before lunging at her. He knocked Ladybug onto her back, holding her down by her belly with a massive paw
'You knew what I was when you took me in.' he snarled as he suddenly lunged downward to tear out queen's throat."

Moonkit stared up at Badgerface with wide eyes. She felt a little bit bewildered after hearing that story. But she knew it held a powerful message. Even if she couldn't quite wrap her head around what it was trying to say.

"Do you know the moral of this story, little one?" The old tom asked, his voice rumbling. Moonkit thought for a moment, concentrating hard. She stared down at her paws then glanced back up at Badgerface.

"Um...don't trust foxes?" She answered skeptically. Badgerface chuckled quietly.

"Close enough," he purred, licking the little kit between the ears. Thinking about that tale made all of Moonkit's fur stand with excitement. Even though it was a bit frightening, it was a powerful story. Now she *really* hoped she'd be able to tell stories like that one day.

Chapter 2

Hazekit awoke with a start. A bitter Leafbare breeze swirled through his fluffy white fur, making the young tom shiver. Hazekit sat up in his nest, squinting to catch a glimpse of the world outside his den. It looked as if it was a cold, snow filled day. But Hazekit couldn't wait to get up and embrace it. Before he was able to make a great escape from his nest, the tomkit felt teeth grip his scruff. A cat pulled him close to their warm body, their tongue beginning to rasp against the back of his neck. Hazekit glanced up to see the beautiful face of his mother. Eelnose's pelt appeared darker in the shade of the roof looming above their heads. Her white fur turned grey, ginger patches now a dull brown. Hazekit whined as his mother groomed him, itching to get away. This would be one of the last snowfalls of the season and he wanted to enjoy it.
Soon, Eelnose released her son with a satisfied purr and nudged him along to go outside and play with his denmates. Ecstatic, Hazekit bolted away and into the fresh air outside the den. His pelt fluffed up in reaction to the sudden chill, making the white tomkit appear twice his normal size. Proudly he trotted through the snow and across the usually sand littered clearing. His stomach growled as he moved along and his mouth watered, yearning for the sweet taste of prey. Maybe a fish or seagull would be good today. Hazekit made his way to the usual spot the fresh-kill was left in to find it almost bare. By now the dawn hunting patrol should have been back, yet the pile was severely lacking. Only a couple scrawny mice and a half-starved vole from the Forest Patch lay where the pile usually towered. Hazekit huffed, a tiny cloud of breath blowing into the wind. How was he ever going to grow big and strong if this was all that there was to eat? Not to mention the clan was starving. With another sigh, Hazekit gave up on looking for a meal in favor of spending time with his friends. Quickly he shuffled through the snow and over to where the other kits were playing. Some threw snow at one another, one was rolling in the sandy snow mix, and the rest were playing Prey Sight-No Sight. Hazekit found his way over to the other kits where he was tossed a snowball by Richfur, the clan's current Den Mother. Hazekit wasn't a big fan of the tom.

His mother said he'd been a kittypet before, only joining the clan after being abandoned in the Forest Patch by his Twolegs. He would have gone to join Treeclan, if Wavestar hadn't been patrolling nearby, and spotted the pale ginger tom before he crossed the border. And now he was here raising his kits while his mate Duneshine continued preforming his warrior duties.
Richfur knew how much Hazekit loved rolling snowballs around, and despite his distaste of the tom, Hazekit gratefully accepted the queen's gift. Happily he pushed it around, making it grow bigger and bigger until it was almost his size. While he worked on his snowball, another kit came over to talk to him. Hazekit glanced over to see the spiky black cat beside him, Urchinkit.

"Wow, for once you've found something that actually looks like you," he teased. "Are you going to melt away like the snow when Newleaf comes?"

"If it means getting away from you, I just might," Hazekit growled. He didn't understand why Urchinkit liked to make fun of him for his pelt when he was in the same boat as he was. Neither tomkit had fur which was the standard for the clan. Black was a color that made it hard to blend in with anything except the shade. It would make hunting harder for Urchinkit unless he'd take the trip down to the Forest Patch. Pure white was a rare color and was hard to manage. Hazekit would have to work tirelessly just to keep his pelt clean. Both toms would also have to be more wary around Twolegs, with such odd colored coats they would be more attracted and tempted to steal them away. Though it was good to be seen as attractive by the strange creatures, it wasn't so good to be targeted by them.
Urchinkit rolled his eyes, batting at Hazekit's ears with a playful paw.

"You'd miss me too much," Urchinkit purred, smirking. Hazekit flicked a small pawful of a sand-snow mixture at him.

"Like I'd miss an annoying clump of fur like you." He mumbled. "Why don't you go play with your siblings instead of messing with me, huh? Oh yeah, that's right, they aren't here anymore! And even if they were, they'd be all the way in Mountainclan!"
Urchinkit took a step back, hurt expressed through his features. His

mouth hung slightly ajar in shock and his eyes opened as wide as a full moon. After a few heartbeats his face turned, the look of pain melting away into a spiteful grimace.

"Oh yeah? Well at least I *had* littermates! At least I know even if they aren't here anymore, I'll never be alone. Unlike you, you unlucky one off piece of gull-dung!"
Hazekit hissed at Urchinkit, launching himself at the spiky black kitten. His insult didn't hurt, per say, as Hazekit had grown used to being viewed as unlucky. However, he wasn't going to sit by idly and let anyone say bad things about him. Hazekit had more respect for himself than that. And so, a fight broke out.
The pair tussled about in a furious pile of black and white fur, claws unsheathed. Urchinkit bit into Hazekit's forepaw, while Hazekit swiped at the other kitten's ear. Droplets of blood began to well from the fresh wound, catching on the white kitten's paw and staining it.
Richfur came rushing over at the scent of blood. The arrival of the Den Mother, however, did not stop the young toms from fighting. Richfur tried to pry the pair apart, but found himself to be unsucessful. So, he called to Beckycreek--another of the queens--to help him. Beckycreek grabbed Hazekit by the scruff, pulling him away from Urchinkit. Richfur held back Urchinkit to prevent him from charging after Hazekit. The two kittens growled out in annoyance, glaring sharply at one another, tails wagging.

"That's enough," Richfur growled sternly. "Look at the mess you've made. There's fur everywhere. Blood on the snow. You've both injured each other, and for what?"

"He started it!" Urchinkit insisted.

"Nuh-uh! Urchinkit's the one who kept bothering me. He started the fight," Hazekit countered.

"Well he made fun of my littermates dying! And my heritage!"

"Only *after* you kept picking on me, you spineless jellyfish!"

"Eat dirt!"

"Go sniff your own butt!"

"Enough!" Beckycreek snapped. "We're going to have a talk with your parents about this. *After* you've both gone to see Curlear."
Both kits simultaneously groaned. Curlear was the clan's head medicine cat. He was probably the oddest looking creature Hazekit had ever seen. He looked like a Skin Snatcher, and he smelled bitter like herbs. Kits hated having to visit the old tom. Especially Hazekit, who'd visit the grouchy wrinkled healer often for picking fights. Still, there was no way to convince the queens that either tom was well enough to skip a checkup. Especially Urchinkit, with his nicked ear. So, both tomkits gave into the will of their superiors, marching over to the medicine den.
Curlear was already waiting outside for them. No doubt he'd heard the kittens' quarrel. Or perhaps he had scented blood. Either way he was prepared to welcome his guests in. With a sweep of his naked tail he guided the little toms in, seating them on opposite sides of the den. He worked on Urchinkit first, licking clean the wound on his ear before slathering it with a poultice.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to save this, little minnow. You're gonna have ta learn an' live without a small piece of your ear."
Urchinkit nodded in understanding, tucking his legs beneath himself as he settled into his nest.

Curlear then turned, giving his attention to Hazekit. He picked up a wad of cobwebs on his way, settling in front of the fluffy kitten. "Causing trouble again, fuzzball?"

"And what of it?" Hazekit snorted indignantly, tail lashing.

"Looks like we're gonna have ta talk to your mother again about that tongue o' yours. Perhaps this time she'll let me go through with cutting it out," Curlear joked, taking some chewed up goldenrod to smear onto Hazekit's bitten forepaw. Hazekit hissed from the sting, resisting the urge to pull away. Curlear then took some of the cobwebs and wrapped them around the bite wound, handling Hazekit's wounded limb gingerly.

"Curlear?" A voice piped from the entrance of the medicine den. Curlear turned at the sound of his name, giving his whiskers twitch.

From the threshold padded a dark gray tabby mollykit. Her light gray chest looked paler within her shadow and her yellow eyes glowed with excitement. She was carrying a bundle of leaves in her jaws, setting them down as she came to stand before the healer. "Bluesky asked me to carry these herbs in to you."

"Ah, yes. Very good. Thank you, Whisperkit. It was very kind o' you to offer my lazy apprentice some help. Perhaps I should trade him in ta mentor you instead," Curlear responded with another quip, scooping up the package to be stored away.

"It was no trouble. I like helping!" Whisperkit giggled with a head tilt. Her focus soon fell upon the little toms who had taken up residence in the den. "Hello there, Hazekit. How's it going?"

"Could've been better if that rat over there hadn't been bugging me," Hazekit murmured.

"I only teased you a little bit!" Urchinkit countered. "It's not like I was trying to be shark-hearted. Unlike *you*. Why do you always have to bring up my littermates? It's mean!"

"Oh Hazekit, were you making Urchinpaw feel bad about that again?" Whisperkit chided softly.

"So? He deserves it!" Hazekit defended himself, fur bristling.

"No cat deserves to be reminded of such pain. We're all bound to go through loss like that sometime," Whisperkit explained, sounding wise and a little morbid. "Besides, we're all clanmates here. We have to learn to get along. We're all Oceanclan's future."

Urchinkit snickered a little. "You sound like Wavestar."
Whisperkit dipped her head bashfully, shuffling around some of the sand beneath her paws. It was well known that Whisperkit and her littermates were the offspring of the clan leader, Wavestar. And as such, they'd all spend a lot of time with the old tom. Even moreso than they spent with their mother or her younger litter. It was evident in the mollykit's speech that he was already preparing them to lead the clan one day. But Whisperkit didn't seem thrilled about that. She loved her father, everyone knew, but her relationship with

her parents was complex. She didn't like to talk about them, much less be compared to them.

"Hazekit," Eelnose, Hazekit's mother, called from outside. The white and ginger she-cat padded her way into the den, her expression cross as she met with her only son. Hazekit shrank under the queen's intense gaze, flashing her a nervous yet involuntary smile. Whisperkit stepped aside, allowing the queen to come forward to speak with her son.

"Hello, mother..!" Hazekit tried to mew innocently.

Eelnose simply shook her head at him with disappointment, giving her attention to Curlear. "I'm sorry that Hazekit's given you more work to do, Curlear."

The furless tom gave Eelnose a glance over his shoulder while he examined the herb bundle Bluesky had gathered. "What work? The tom's only doing his job. Kits cause mischief. And I've been a medicine cat long enough ta know this sort of fighting is inevitable between the young scraps. As you clanborns say, fighting is a show o' strength. You should be proud of your son for havin' such spirit."

"I would be if he were attacking enemies instead of allies. Silverpelt knows we've had enough infighting in the past. I won't allow that to follow Oceanclan's future as well." The ginger and white molly responded seriously.

"Aye, but he'll be clawing at the other clans soon enough I'm sure. For now perhaps it might be best ta try and curve that mouth o' his. That's what keeps gettin' him in trouble."

Eelnose let out a thoughtful hum. "Noted. Thank you, Curlear. Is he fit enough to leave the medicine den?"

"Hm? Oh yes, of course. Just make sure that forepaw o' his stays covered for the rest of the day."

"I will," agreed the queen, turning to grab Hazekit by the scruff. Hazekit let out a whine as he was lifted from his nest. The attention his denmates fell upon him as he was carried away. Whisperkit

watched on with pity, while Urchinkit looked delighted seeing Hazekit getting in trouble. Hazekit looked away, shame prickling his pelt. He was so embarrassed. *Stupid furballs. Stop staring at me like that!*
Eelnose carried her son out of the medicine den, across camp, and into the abandoned car which made up the nursery. The long deceased monster was devoid of all other cats at this time, with the exception of Beckycreek's young litter. It would seem Eelnose was left on kitsitting duty, and she was dragging Hazekit along as punishment. Hazekit resisted the urge to groan as his mother placed him into their shared nest.

"Motherrr, you embarrassed me in front of my denmates!" He complained, ears lowered.

Eelnose lashed her tail. "As if it's not embarrassing having a son who makes trouble for everyone in the clan?"

Hazekit winced at the she-cat's words. "I did what I thought was right! You've always told me halfclanners and outsiders are beneath us. I was only trying to remind Urchinkit of his place."

"By fighting your clanmate and making a fool of us both?" Eelnose prompted.

"I didn't mean to..." Hazekit muttered, lowering his head.

Eelnose shook her head slowly, wrapping her body around Hazekit's as she got more comfortable in their nest. "My son, you must learn to coincide with all those who live amongst Oceanclan. Though we are different, we are still a clan. Despite how lowly some among us might be." The ginger and white molly rasped her tongue between the young tom's ears as she continued. "We shouldn't use our words or fight in order to prove to others what they are. In due time all cats show their true selves. But awareness is required in order for one's true self to be recognized."

"What does that mean?" Hazekit asked.

"It means that you must be aware of the nature of the cats you surround yourself with. Its wise to be wary of some. But their

alliance is better than making an enemy of them. Even if you don't like who they are or where they come from," elaborated Eelnose.

"But how can we trust them? How can we rely on fat lazy kittypets or sneaky rouges the way we can other Oceanclan cats? Even halfclanners can't be relied on with their split loyalties." Hazekit was sure of the words he spoke. They were ones told to him by his only ally in the world-- his mother. Eelnose was an honest cat. And surely she would understand where he was coming from.

"Everyone has their own skill set that you can rely on. Kittypets can be lazy, but they are persuasive, especially towards Twolegs. Rouges may be sneaky, but they can utilize that ability and make great allies in wartime. And halfclan cats bring with them the strengths and skills from their second clan. You must learn to work with what other cats can provide and worry about their drawbacks later."

Hazekit sighed, resting his chin on his paws. "You're so wise, mother."

"That I am. I've lived many seasons. My experiences have made me as intelligent as I am." Eelnose chuckled.

"Do you think I can become as great as you someday?" Hazekit looked up at his mother with hopeful eyes. Eelnose was a powerful warrior. She survived apprenticeship under Pebblestar The Manevolent's rule, being the last of her class left alive at the end of the tyrannical leader's reign. She was given her warrior's name at only nine moons old, for her tracking abilities and strength in battle. Even now as a senior warrior she was highly respected and sought after by Wavestar for strategizing. She was a cat Oceanclan could be proud of. Hazekit hoped that one day he could be regarded in the same way.

"I think you will be as great as you can be. It's up to you decide your limits," Eelnose answered simply, nuzzling Hazekit's cheek. That wasn't exactly the response the little tom was looking for. But he knew that he wouldn't be able to push more on the matter. Eelnose had stated her opinion; she wouldn't change it. Hazekit needed to be content with what he had. Sighing once more, Hazekit

allowed his eyes to flutter shut, lids heavy with fatigue. Between the fight with Urchinkit and not eating, the little tom found himself growning tired. And with nothing else to do while on punishment for the rest of the day, Hazekit decided this was a good time for a nap.

Chapter 3

Moonkit tumbled around in the snowy clearing of Treeclan's camp with a squeal. Many of the kits were outside busy playing tag, and Moonkit was trying to keep herself away from the cat who had chosen to be 'it'. She hopped along through the snow, glancing behind her to see if she was being pursued. To her joy, she was. Emberpaw--one of the clan's new apprentices--was right on her tail, swiping her paw out in an attempt to touch the little silver and white kit.

"I'm gonna get you!" The pale calico warned with a laugh. Moonkit squealed out a *"noo"* lifting her paws higher to gain speed. The snow in the clearing was deep, halfway up her foreleg. It was hard to maneuver through it, which allowed Emberpaw--who was a few whisker-length taller--to gain the advantage. But Moonkit was a fast runner. Even in a snowbank she could outrun most clanmates around her age. She had good endurance too, tiring out the six moon old apprentice easily.
Moonkit took a nosedive into the elder's den, safely out of Emberpaw's grasp. Emberpaw gave up her pursuit of the little silver and white kit, turning her sights to another of the nursery's members who would make for easier prey. Moonkit laughed as she watched Emberpaw chase Foxkit around, his tail only a claw's reach away. With a strong leap, Emberpaw pounced onto the ginger tomkit, squashing him in the snow. This made Moonkit laugh harder. But in her fit of glee, she had forgotten to be mindful of the old warriors who napped within the den she sheltered in.

"Oi," called a cat, making Moonkit jump. "Keep it down, would you? I'm trying to sleep!" Croacked the clan's oldest elder, Daisypetal. She was Blazestar and Mothsong's mother. She was almost legendary for it and for her long life span. In her old age she was beginning to grow blind, which made her hearing even sharper than it was in her prime. Moonkit felt guilty for making so much noise.

"I'm sorry, Daisypetal. I wasn't thinking," she apologized sincerely. "I

didn't mean to disturb anyone. Is there any way I can make up for it?"

Daisypetal stretched in her nest, letting out a soft purr. "It's alright, little one. Just be more mindful next time. As for what you can do to make it up to me, I suppose bringing over a nice piece of prey could work."

Moonkit beamed at the request. "You've got it! I'll be right back," she promised, dashing out of the elder's den. She hurried over to where the fresh-kill pile was being kept, considering what sort of prey she'd bring to the wise old elder. But when she arrived, Moonkit realized there was nothing left for anyone to eat. *Impossible,* she thought. Leafbare would be over soon. There had to be food in the camp somewhere. Moonkit moved on to another place where she thought prey might be kept. She recalled Wolfheart telling her about the extras the warriors would store in case of a food shortage. Moonkit began digging through the snow to pull out leftovers from the stockpile. She was fortunate enough to uncover a sparrow, just big enough to feed Daisypetal. Though it was cold, Moonkit was sure the elder would be grateful for the meal. But it was a very scrawny one. Moonkit wondered why there wasn't more prey to choose from. The first of the day's hunting patrols had already returned. Was there still so little out there to catch? Surely there must be better prey somewhere, hiding in the tiny spots warriors couldn't normally reach. Why couldn't they get the youngest apprentices to squeeze into the small spaces?
Moonkit gave her head a shake, clearing it of her thoughts for the time beging. Instead, she picked up the sparrow she uncovered, taking it over to Daisypetal. The old she-cat thanked the little molly for her generosity, sending her back on her way. Moonkit pranced from the elder's den again, thinking about what she wanted to do now. Across the way, she spotted Tigerkit by the dry patch where the fresh-kill pile usually sat. She could see her friend taking notice of the lack of food. Realizing she would not be eating, Tigerkit found a nearby moss ball to keep her entertained. Moonkit watched her friend play, prepared to jump in and join her. But before she could, another cat padded over to keep the tabby she-kit company.

"So. Nothing good to eat, huh?" Moonkit heard Rainkit mew as she

sat nearby. Tigerkit shook her head, while Moonkit eyed her sister suspiciously. She recognized the tone the other kitten was using. No doubt that there was something mischievous stirring in the little molly's mind.
"It really sucks. But, that means you can help me with something."

Tigerkit paused in her play to look at the white and gray patched mollykit. "Depends. What do you need me to do?"
Rainkit stepped closer to Tigerkit, lifting a paw to cup over her ear to keep anyone nearby from hearing. Moonkit wondered what they were whispering about. They seemed to bicker back and forth for a few heartbeats before taking another pause. Tigerkit seemed to be lost in thought for a moment before grinning and nodding at the white and gray patched mollykit. With that, the two kittens split up. Rainkit skipped over to speak with Blazestar's sons while Tigerkit made her way over to Moonkit.

"Moomoo, Rainkit and I have come up with a super cool plan!" she proclaimed.

"What is it?" Moonkit asked, curiosity piqued.

Tigerkit gave a glance over each shoulder, bringing herself closer to her best friend. "We're planning on sneaking out into the forest to hunt. While we're supposed to be taking a nap, we'll slip away through a secret passage in the blackthorns that Rainkit found."
Moonkit looked at her skeptically, tail-tip twitching. How were they supposed to go hunting? They weren't even apprentices yet, they didn't know the first thing about catching prey. Tigerkit rolled her eyes.
"I know it sounds crazy, but hear me out. The clan is starving. We're tiny enough to fit into things like mouse holes and rabbit burrows. We can catch the prey that the warriors can't. We'll be heroes! Plus we all have to do our part to take care of the clan; this is something we can do."

Moonkit thought it over for a heartbeat. "It sounds a little dangerous. But we *are* starving, so... alright. I'll come with you."

"Great!" Tigerkit cheered. "Meet me at the front of the nursery at nap time. I'll see you later, Moomoo."

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Sunhigh arrived a short time later. The kits were herded into the nursery by Sweetclaw, and nudged into their nests by their parents. Everyone settled down inside the den for a nap. Or at least that's what the kits made the queens believe. When only the sounds of snoring and soft breathing filled the nursery, the kits rose. Silently, they gathered in an empty spot of the nursery, speaking to each other in the Silent Language.

"Does everyone know where we're going to get out?" Tigerkit signed, standing on her hind legs momentarily to create the word "out". The other kits nodded.
"Good, then follow me."
Most of the kits were excited to complete the task, while others were skeptical. Berrykit, Black-kit, and Beekit decided to stay back as the rest of the kits made the trek up the incline and out into the chill of mid-day.
With Rainkit and Tigerkit at the lead, the kitten patrol sucessfully snuck out of the nursery. Many of the clan's warriors were taking shelter from the cold in their dens, and those who weren't were out on patrol. With the coast clear, the Treeclan kits could slip under the blackthorn bushes by the Entrance Tree. The bushes were a lot thinner on this side of camp but even still it proved to be a challenge to crawl under if one had long fur. Carefully, each kit made their way under the blackthorns and into the vast forest beyond. Rainkit stepped forward to sniff the air as the final stragglers huddled with the rest of the group. She was the best tracker out of the kits, and was happy to lend a paw in checking to see which way they should go.

"The patrols went that way." Rainkit pointed with her tail at some tracks in the snow. "I can still faintly smell them, too. They must be a good distance away from camp by now."

"So we should go that way," Tigerkit proclaimed, leading the hunting party in the opposite direction.
For a while the kits searched for the scent of prey on the ground, trying to hunt like warriors did. But they found themselves unlucky in successfully nabbing anything. At one point they had spotted a pregnant squirrel, but the crunching of snow under their paws
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alerted it of their presence and sent it scrambling up a tree. If this had been any other season a cat may have attempted to climb after it. But the tree branches were far too icy to get a grip on now. Frustrated, Adderkit stepped forward and offered to lead the kitten patrol.

"You said we'd search in places warriors can't," he reminded Rainkit, his tone harsh. "So let's stop acting like mouse-brains and *actually* look in holes and stuff!" Bravely, the ginger and white tom charged through the snow over to a tree with a hollow underneath. He sniffed at it before slipping inside, a determined look on his young face. The other kits paused, waiting close by the tree. The sounds of Adderkit growling and thumping around exploded from the hole, dying down after a few heartbeats. The others held their breath, staring intently at the tree until Adderkit emerged, dragging out a young rabbit almost as big as he was. Both the prey and the tom were splattered with blood. The rabbit had a jagged tear in its neck, its head hanging at an awkward angle. But still it was dead, and the triumph in Adderkit's orange eyes was unmistakable.

"Adderkit!" Rainkit trilled, bouncing up to him to bump her forehead against his affectionately, tail held high. "Talk about acting like a mouse-brain. What happened in there?"

Adderkit dropped his catch at his paws. "I had to wrestle the rabbit to pin it down. It put up quite a fight; I was scared it would bolt out of the hole."

Tigerkit pranced up to them. "It looks all mangled. What'd you do, sit on it?" Adderkit simply hissed at her in response.
"Well I guess prey is prey. The warriors are gonna be so impressed though! Grab it and lets keep moving."

A long while went by. The kits continued to walk through the snow, peeking into holes and under bushes, attempting to catch some prey. Only the eldest kits managed to catch anything, though most of it ended up half destroyed from inexperience. Annoyed, Moonkit froze mid stride. She was fed up with all this walking and searching. They were barely making any catches for this expedition to be worth it. And their families would probably notice they were all missing soon. The last thing Moonkit wanted was to make

anybody worried.

"I think we've done enough hunting for today," she decided, sitting down. "We should go home."

"What?" Tigerkit gasped, walking up to her. "No way, we're doing great! If we stop now the clan won't have enough for the warriors to eat. We can't have a clan if all the warriors starve to death."

"The clan won't have a future if all of its kits freeze in the snow!" Moonkit countered. "And if the warriors starve, the clan will need us to take their place. How can we, if all of us are dead?"

Tigerkit growled in frustration, turning around to continue forward. "If you want to go home, fine, go. But the rest of us will keep hunting."

Moonkit let out a huff, pushing herself back onto her paws. If everyone was going to be so adamant about continuing the mission, then she would have to persuriver along with them.
Soon, the day grew older and snow began to fall again. It cascaded down in large white flakes, coating the kittens' soft fur. They huddled together for warmth as they trudged on until their paws could not carry them any further.

"I-I-I think we-we should g-go back," mewled Tinykit, her teeth chattering.

"But...how?" Squeaked Flamekit, whipping his head around. The world around them was turned into a curtain of foggy white, stunned into complete silence. The flurry had begun to turn into a snow squall, obstructing the kittens' vision. And their tracks had long since been covered over. There was no way of knowing which way to go now.
Thinner coated kits huddled closely to longer coated ones, burying their snouts into their fluff. The fluffier kittens laid down, covering their faces with their tails. Adderkit and Rainkit held the prey under them protectively, providing their bellies just a little protection from the snow covered ground beneath them.

"I want my mama," Moonkit sniffled, hiding her face.

Sunkit pulled away from the others, receiving protests from those who were cuddled around him. The ginger and white tom stood on tip-toe, inhaling deeply. "Heeeelp!" He wailed. He paused momentarily before trying again. "Somebody! Help us!!" His voice traveled through the trees; echos dying in the wind. Disappointment darkened Sunkit's green gaze as he settled back down with the others. Moonkit shivered vigorously, cursing herself in her mind. Why did she even agree to go along with this plan? Now they were all hungry and freezing in the snow. Would the warriors be able to find them in this weather? She let out a deep sigh, hiding her face into Tigerkit's plush tabby and white coat. Moonkit shouldn't have listened to her. She should have gone home like she wanted to earlier. But she couldn't leave her friends and littermates out here alone. She would never be able to forgive herself if she had left and they had never returned. This was a predicament they had all agreed to get themselves into; they would go through with this together until the end.
An unmeasurable amount of time passed. The kits began to grow weaker by the heartbeat. All hope seemed to be lost. Moonkit, head heavy from the cold, looked up from the warm body next to her. Her nose tingled from the bitter chill, but that was the last thing on her mind right now. In the distance she could see an orange shape traveling through the snowfall. *Is that a Starclan warrior, coming to lead us to Silverpelt?*
An unrecognizable voice called out, the words spoken lost in to the distance. Beside the orange shape, more dark shadows began to appear, drawing nearer. Hope swelled inside of Moonkit.

"Guys, look," she mewed, getting the attention of her peers. "Help...help..!" She tried to cry out. The other kits joined in the call. Soon, the shapes in the distance became the warriors a bear length away. Fluffy, stocky warriors surrounded the kits, with Blazestar at the head of the party.

"There you are!" Sweetclaw exclaimed, a purr of relief rumbling in her throat. She dashed forward and bent down to lick some frost off of each kit, chiding them for running away. After each kitten was cleaned the warriors picked them up, carrying them back in the direction of home.

"My prey..." Adderkit mewled weakly as his father carried him up and away from his catch. Rainkit grabbed hold of it before Wolfheart picked her up. The white and gray patched kit smiled at Adderkit who blinked at her with gratitude.

"My babies!" Brightsky cried, running out from the nursery, over to grab her kits from the warriors. More of the queens spilled out of their den to collect the kits as they returned home, wailing out in relief as they were safely reunited. They led the kits down into the shelter of the nursery tree, licking the little one's fur backwards to warm them. Moonkit purred as Brightsky rasped her tongue against her downy fur vigorously, feeling returning to her frozen body at long last. All the while, Sweetclaw counted, making sure every nursery resident was present and accounted for. As the last of the kits was tugged into their nests, Mothsong came trotting along, herbs clenched tightly in her jaws. She dipped into the nursery, checking on each kit, feeding them herbs to help ward off frostbite and hypothermia. Tigerkit let out an audible squeak of disgust as Mothsong shoved a wad of ragweed and lavander down her throat, her mother fixing her with a harsh glare to warn her of spitting them back up. Brightsky let her five kits share their herbs, each taking equal amounts at once to get it done and over with quickly. After, the queens gathered their little hunters in the center of the den, curling their bodies around them. Moonkit nestled herself by her mother's warm belly, sighing with relief. She drank in her calming milky scent, shutting her eyes. Tigerkit squeezed her way through the pile to come settle beside her, her long fur heating the silver and white mollykit up even more. Moonkit purred, grooming her friend's cheek. She was mad, yes, but grateful they had all made it back alive.

"Whose idea was it to go out into the forest?" Brightsky asked, her voice laced with temper. Moonkit's eyes fluttered open, ears pinning back against her head. She wanted to tell her mother all about what had gone on, but she didn't want her sister and Tigerkit to hate her for speaking up.
"Well?"
No kit dare speak up for quite some time, only the sound of the wind whistling outside occupied the space with its sound.

"It..it was Rainkit and Tigerkit! " Beekit finally piped, the pressure getting to her. Both guilty kits hissed at her with anger. Brightsky's eyes flickered onto them, judgement riddled deep within her blue gaze.

Speckleface let out a deep sigh, shaking her head. "What are we going to do with you?"

"We will figure that out in the morning," Sweetclaw responded to the question that was clearly rhetorical. "For now, we should let these brave little warriors rest."
Rest, yes, that sounded good to Moonkit. She was exhausted from the cold and the journey they had taken, even after eating the strengthening herbs. Moonkit could feel her eyes growing heavy, and allowed them to droop closed once again. Soon sleep blanketed over her, pulling the kit into its warm embrace.

Chapter 4

"Why do we have to go play outside?" Skunkkit whined as Sweetclaw herded the kittens out of the nursery the next day.

"Grown-up business, little chipmunk. It does not concern you," the cream colored queen responded. "Now you all behave yourselves. Elmfoot and Silverhawk will be keeping an eye on you."

"Yes, Sweetclaw," murmured some of the kits in reply, Moonkit included. The Den Mother gave one satisfied nod, turning tail and padding over to Tigerkit. She touched her nose to the little tabby's shoulder, prompting her to follow. Then Sweetclaw did the same with Rainkit. What could the queen need with Moonkit's best friend and sister? Moonkit watched the three she-cats curiously as they padded back under the familiar tree roots that made up their den. Were they in trouble? Moonkit's thoughts drifted back to the day before when they'd all gone into the forest to hunt. *I can't let them get into trouble for that!* She thought. Moonkit's head swung around to search the clearing.

By the entrance to the elder's den, she saw Elmfoot sunbathing. The old tom laid with his legs tucked beneath him, head raised slightly to soak in the warm golden rays. Many moons ago the tabby had been Treeclan's Den Mother. When he was in charge, he'd been notorious for keeping a close eye on the kit-resistance of his den. But now in his retirement, the tom was more inclined to let curious kits wander than to worry about keeping them all in line. Sneaking out of his sight would be easy. Getting away from the other kitsitter however, might not be as simple.

In a dry spot by the base of the Great Stump, Moonkit noticed Silverhawk. The silver and black striped tabby was sharing tongues with Violetshade, her eldest kit. Though she looked around to watch the kits as they played, the queen seemed distracted enough. If she was careful, Moonkit would be able to creep away without raising any alarms.

Stealthily, the little silver and white kitten stalked over to the nursery. She crawled between two intertwining roots where she

could easily listen in to any conversations, yet stay out of sight. Every now and then she glanced over her shoulder, checking to make sure her sitters would not find out what she was doing. Otherwise, a majority of her focus remained on the inside of the nursery.

It seemed a meeting had been called. Moonkit strained her ears to listen to all the voices she could pick up on. She racked her brain to figure out who they all belonged to. It was easy to recognize the voice of her mother, Brightsky, when she spoke. Her sweet mew was distinguishable from any other in the whole clan. She sounded concerned, probably speaking between licks given to Rainkit.

"Must we really punish them?" The queen fretted.

"Yes, Brightsky." That was Thornberry's mew. Thornberry was the clan's deputy. He was a nice enough tom, really sweet and very goofy at times, but he knew when to get serious. He sure sounded like he was right now, his tone deepened with fatherly sternness. "Kits who go unpunished are bound to repeat their mistakes again. They need to be reprimanded. They've broken the Warrior Code."

"'Broken the Warrior Code,' my tail," mocked Speckleface, Tigerkit's mother. "The Warrior Code says nothing about kits wandering from camp."

"It does say prey must be hunted only to be eaten. Those kits were out there hunting to better hone their skills."

"Not to mention," chimed in the voice of Cardinaltail, the Code Keeper, "there is an unofficial rule that says kits are not to leave camp, unless with a warrior."

"That's all a bunch of fox dung," Speckleface cursed.

"Yeah!" Tigerkit jumped in. "We weren't going out to hone our skills. We went hunting to bring food home for the clan. We're not mouse-brains!"

"Hush," hissed Speckleface.

"Regardless," Moonkit heard Blazestar's voice join the conversation

now, "these kits should face the consequences of their actions. They could have died yesterday. A majority of our kits could have. That isn't something that can be excused with an apology."

"Blazestar is right, I'm afraid," Sweetclaw sighed. Her defeated tone made Moonkit bristle with ire. She couldn't let her loved ones be punished for trying to do the right thing. Bravely, the little silver and white kit charged into the nursery, determined to vouch for Rainkit and Tigerkit's innocence.

"Wait!" She called, skidding to a halt in the center of the den. The adult cats all looked at her, varying degree of quizzical and annoyed expressions on their faces. "You can't punish Rainkit and Tigerkit! They didn't do anything wrong!"

"Moonkit," Brightsky began to scold, "you know better than to stick your nose into matters that don't concern you. You shouldn't even be here. Go back outside and play with the others."

"No! I'm not going until you all listen to me," Moonkit protested defiantly. "Rainkit and Tigerkit were thinking about the clan when they led us all out of camp. The fresh-kill pile was barren. Rainkit thought that if we went out and looked in the places the warriors couldn't, we could bring home enough prey for every cat. She's the one who tracked most of the animals we found. And Tigerkit helped to organize everyone. She kept us all together, gave us orders, and reassured us when we wandered to far. She was bravest kit of all of us!"

"Is that bravery?" Blazestar challenged, anger burning in his orange eyes. The temper he tried to hide within betrayed him. "Or *ignorance*?"
Moonkit shrank under the leader's gaze. No wonder why the tom had been named Blazefang in his warriorhood. The tom had a bite that seemed to sting like fire. And an attitude that blazed bright within him. Moonkit was certainly intimidated, but at the same time could not help feeling a great amount of respect for the ginger tom.
"Since you are so eager to defend such a foolish plan, perhaps you should be punished alongside your little friends. We don't want you following in their pawsteps after all," the leader threatened.

"Now hang on a heartbeat, Blazestar. That decision isn't yours to make," Sweetclaw interrupted. She stepped in front of Moonkit defensively, wrapping her fluffy tail around her. "*I* am the Den Mother here. Kit punishments are *mine* to handle. You're simply here to bare witness to my decisions. I say Moonkit has done nothing wrong. We are to send her on her way and finish our business with the other kits."

Blazestar glared at the Den Mother for another tense few heartbeats. "...Fine. Get her out of here, now," he growled, pointing his muzzle towards the exit. Brightsky gave Moonkit a lick on the head before Sweetclaw grabbed her by the scruff, carrying her back outside. She dropped the little kit off with Elmfoot, instructing her predecessor to keep a very close eye on the kit. Elmfoot agreed, wrapping his paws around Moonkit as Sweetclaw turned and retreated back into the nursery. Moonkit let out a deep sigh. *Well, I did my best. At least Rainkit and Tigerkit can't say that I didn't do anything to help them.*

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Brightsky came to collect Moonkit when the sun had finally set. By then, the little silver and white kitten was too tired to walk on her own. She'd spent the rest of the day entertaining the elders while Rainkit, Tigerkit, and the others spent most of their time playing. After thanking the old warriors for their hospitality, Brightsky gently picked her kit up, taking her to back to their den. Moonkit wiggled, bringing herself closer to Brightsky's belly as they got settled into their nest. She breathed in her mother's milky scent, feeling her body relax. The comfort of her family surrounding her was enough to coax the fluffy kitten into a gentle slumber.

But by the middle of the night, Moonkit became restless. A sense of foreboding had settled upon her and she couldn't understand why. Out of habit, she sat up and looked at the dozing cats which neighbored her. To her left, Rainkit slept clumsily half outside and half inside the nest. A strange panting sound could be heard hovering just above her head. The white and gray patched kit lazily opened her eyes to see what was causing the ruckus. Moonkit followed her sister's gaze, silently gasping as she noticed the huge shape lingering in the dark over them. The she-kits were met with
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freakish amber eyes. Red and white fur glowed in the light of the moon, entering through a hole the creature must have slipped through. A set of sharp teeth flashed them as the intruder licked its lips, warning the littermates of the danger they were in. *A fox!* Rainkit let out a terrified shriek. She tried to scramble to her paws, which sent the creature into a frenzy. It yowled and sank its razor sharp teeth into her flesh, dragging her from her nest. It shook Rainkit wildly, splattering kit blood everywhere. Moonkit jumped out of the way; but not before being painted with the crimson remains of her sister. She pressed herself against Brightsky's belly protectively, fluffing up her fur. Instinctively her claws slid out, preparing for a fight.

The yowl had woken every kit and queen in the nursery. They all jumped back to stare in horror at the giant fox with blood dripping from its jaw. It dropped the shredded corpse of Rainkit instantly, its gaze sweeping over the startled residence of the nursery. For a heartbeat it looked frightened. Had it not realized how many grown cats lived within this tree?

"Rainkit!" wailed a tiny voice. Sparrowkit, one of Tigerkit's brothers, bolted out of his nest and straight towards the torn up carcass of the little gray patched kitten.

"No!" Smokekit yowled, rushing away from Magpiekit to stop the other tom. But it was too late. In a flash, the fox whipped around with a hungry howl, lunging for Sparrowkit and pinning the fluffy tabby to the floor. Its reeled back a paw and smacked Smokekit aside, tearing one of his ears in the process. Smokekit scrambled out of striking range, avoiding another blow from the dastardly creature as it swung again; this time tearing open Sparrowkit's belly. It only took a few heartbeats for it all to happen, yet the disaster felt like it lasted seasons to one as young as Moonkit.

"Our kits! It's going to kill all of our kits!" Brightsky cried out, reaching for Smokekit to herd him back to her belly. Speckleface, Silverhawk, Leafheart, and Sweetclaw let out vicious yowls, launching themselves at the intruding fox. Mapleshine picked up the badly injured Sparrowkit delicately, bringing him to the medicine den when given chance. Meanwhile, Brightsky gathered the remaining kits and led them to the outside of the

dirtplace; the farthest point from the nursery they could get without leaving camp. She counted everyone, making sure no other kits had been lost to the vile red creature. Then she allowed herself to break down, collapsing to the floor in a fit of sobs. She grabbed Smokekit and held him close to herself, licking his injured ear between her cries.
Moonkit sat amongst her peers staring back at the den from once they'd fled. She was just as shaken as the rest. She felt overwhelmed. She could hardly process what was going on. But she wasn't afraid; just curious to know what was happening in the nursery now. Tigerkit had settled by her side at this point, giving her a few licks on the cheek to help her settle. Moonkit was grateful for her best friend's presence but she was too preoccupation to return the gesture. Out of the corner of her eye, Moonkit swore she spotted a cat sneaking away from the blackthorns to climb up into the warriors den. It was as if whoever it was did not want to be detected. Or perhaps they were rushing to the den to warn the other warriors of what was going on.
Curiosity got the better of the little silver and white kitten, bringing her to sneak away from Tigerkit's side and back to the nursery. The moonlight behind Moonkit illuminated the inside of the den from this angle. Inside, she watched as the four remaining queens fought off the unruly creature.

"How dare you intrude on a clan of warriors!" Sweetclaw yowled, jumping onto the fox's back. With her powerful limbs she was able to force it onto the ground. Leafheart joined in to push the creature onto its side, clawing at its flank furiously. The fox shrieked and twisted in response, trying to avoid her blows. Speckleface was striking the fox's head, aiming to slit its throat. But the fox managed to shake the attacking queens off, jumping back onto its feet as if it hadn't been injured at all. Speckleface hissed, launching herself at it from the front once more, meeting its open jaws with her unsheathed claws. She scratched at its face and eyes wildly, receiving hard, skin breaking bites in return to her limbs, neck, and head. She yowled, backing away as it drove its teeth deep into her shoulder close to her neck. In retaliation, Sweetclaw threw herself onto the beast once more, and was easily tossed aside because of her growing exhaustion. Though she was the Den Mother, Sweetclaw was getting up there in the years. Her bones were more

brittle now and she was very close to retiring. Despite her age, she was never one to back down, though it wasn't often she had to deal with serious threats like predators attacking the nursery. The fox lunged, landing on top of her, tearing at her delicate belly. Sweetclaw cried out in pain as she tried to fight off the demon creature without luck, before eventually falling silent. Just then, warriors: Wolfheart, Greytuft, Spruceleap, Robinspots, and Blazestar all came barreling towards the nursery to help. Moonkit jumped aside, allowing them entrance before returning to her post. Blazestar was the first warrior to strike, swearing vengeance on the fox for the murder of his dear friend, Sweetclaw. The fox snarled, turning on the leader and slicing open his neck with ease. Then it whipped back around, placing its focus onto the other cats. Moonkit gasped, watching the mighty tom fall. He was gurgling on his own blood, going limp only heartbeats after. *He's dead!* Moonkit's mind screamed in woe. But a moment later, she saw thn ginger tom twitch. He took one heavy gasp for air as he sat up, looking from the den entrance to his warriors, who'd taken over the battle in his temporary absence. *Oh, he lost a life! Thank Starclan he still has some to spare*, Moonkit breathed a sigh of relief. With the leader returned, the eight grown cats finally managed to defeat the dastardly fox once and for all.

By this point, the whole clan had been woken up by the noise. They all stared at the nursery, their eyes glowing green and yellow in the darkness. Their fear scent clouded the air around camp as the conquering heroes emerged.

Each cat was exhausted; drenched in the blood of the fox and their fellow warriors. Leafheart leaned against Blazestar, limping, her one leg bleeding badly. Speckleface had to have the help of Spruceleap and Robinspots just to stand up, yet alone walk. She was very weak and the damage on her was probably the most severe out of the survivors. Tigerkit ran over to be with her mother, picking up her tail tip in her jaws to keep it from dragging in the dust. Silverhawk carried Sweetclaw's limp body out slowly, sadness welling in her soft yellow eyes. A blood trail was left behind her as the dead queen's body was dragged across the leaf-litter hollow of camp. Finally, Greytuft and Wolfheart pulled the body of the intruding fox out, throwing it unceremoniously out into the clearing. The witnessing clanmates let out gasps of surprise and shock, hissing at the fox's carcass. Brightsky tried her best to block the kits' view, but

most of them saw everything. Magpiekit let out a shrill cry, laying down to cover her face with her paws. Flamekit and Blackkit crowded around her, shielding one another from the horrific sight while Tigerkit sat by her mother's side.
Mothsong, the clan medicine cat, charged out of her den with a bundle of herbs in her jaws. She immediately began to work on the injured, trying her best to help them all. Berrykit, Tigerkit's youngest brother, padded over to watch the calico she-cat work. Mothsong worked especially hard on Speckleface who was now laying on the ground. Her eyes were closed and her breathing was shallow and rapid. The wound on her shoulder which was so close to her neck continued to gush blood, even through the moss-cobweb mixture that dressed it. Her other injuries didn't look any better.
Berrykit did his best to assist the medicine cat, cleaning Speckleface's less bloody wounds. Tigerkit sat by his side to help, head bent as if praying silently to Starclan for their mother's recovery. Moonkit raced over to provide her friend comfort.

"She's lost far too much blood and is fading fast," Mothsong announced with grief. "There's nothing to be done that can save her. She's bound for the Twilight Passage now. But the least I can do is try to make her comfortable as she moves on to the next relm." The pretty calico pushed a couple poppy seeds into Speckleface's mouth to help ease her pain. Speckleface barely opened one of her eyes to look at her medicine cat with pain, but gratitude, then turned her weak gaze onto her kits.

"What about Sparrowkit? How is he?" asked Robinspots as he walked up to lay next to his dying mate, worry seeping in his sorrowful voice. Mothsong shook her head slowly and Robinspots lowered his ears.
"I will bring him to Speckleface so they can travel to Starclan together," she offered, fetching the dying kit to put him at his mother's side. The clan gathered around the bodies of their fallen clanmates, placed lovingly in the center of camp, while some went to discard the fox out in the dirtplace. Together, they watched the lives of Speckleface and Sparrowkit slip away into the night, their spirits becoming one with the stars.

Chapter 5

"Let all cats strong enough to brace the ocean's waves gather here beneath the Mighty Dune for a clan meeting."
Hazekit's pelt prickled as he heard Wavestar call from outside the nursery. He felt antsy beneath his mother, wanting to join their clanmates in the clearing for the meeting. But Eelnose was stubborn, unwilling to release her son until he was clean enough for presentation. She had been working tirelessly on the little tom's fur since dawn, grooming it to perfection. The morning brought with it great importance, after all. The clan would be gaining a new apprentice today. And that apprentice was meant to be Hazekit. This knowledge made the fluffy white tom all the more eager to break out of the nursery. He knew the meeting had been called especially for him. Hazekit hadn't known if he would even experience his apprentice ceremony so soon, after the fight he'd gotten into with Urchinkit two moons before. He'd sworn he was going to be held back; and without anyone telling him so too, just to rub salt in his wound. But much to the young tom's delight, he would get to be promoted at six moons after all.

"Motherrr, the clan is waiting for me!" Hazekit griped.

"They can wait a little longer," Eelnose argued back through a knot in the kit's fur. "No son of mine will be made an apprentice looking like a washed up piece of Twoleg trash. How would that reflect on me? Now be quiet and be patient "
Hazekit let out a groan, resting his chin on his paws as she continued to wash him. *Why is it always about you?*

"Eelnose?"
Hazekit perked up at the sound of another cat calling for his mother. His excitement grew as he recognized the warrior who had stepped into the den. It was Scallopfall, Hazekit's father. Hazekit hadn't seen the tom visit the broken down car since he was given his kit naming ceremony.
"Wavestar is growing impatient waiting for you two. He says if you

don't come out soon he'll have to make his own kits apprentices instead."

Eelnose scoffed. "His kittens aren't even six moons old yet. He'd really break the warrior code because I kept him waiting too long?"

"He thinks by the time you're ready to come out, his kits *will* be six moons old," Scallopfall remarked back, rolling his eyes. Hazekit resisted the urge to laugh.

Eelnose growled, finally setting Hazekit free from her grasp. She rose with a swish of her tail, raising her muzzle into the air. "Come, Hazekit. I think the clan is finally ready to be graced by our presence."

"Thank Silverpelt," Scallopfall muttered under his breath before returning to the clearing. Hazekit was ready to race out after him. It would be nice to be led to his apprentice ceremony by his father instead of Eelnose. But the queen would not allow the tom to steal her spotlight. Hazekit was all too aware that his mother wanted the privilege of walking him up to the clan's leader.
"I put the work into raising you, not Scallopfall. I deserve the recognition", Hazekit recalled her saying not too long ago, when the mention of his promotion had been brought up in conversation. Eelnose took the lead out of the nursery, strutting proudly through the crowd, making Hazekit follow behind her. He felt more like a newborn than a soon to be warrior, by the way she was treating him. But Hazekit didn't complain; he knew that he wouldn't have to be used as his mother's prop for much longer. Of course he respected her greatly, but he was ready to have more independence. He only hoped that the mentor he would be assigned would allow him the room he needed to breathe.

"Ah, Hazekit, there you are," Wavestar remarked as the fluffy white tom settled beneath the Mighty Dune.

"Finally," Urchinkit piped. Hazekit whipped his head around to look at the spikey furred tom. He sat an equal distance from the Mighty Dune with only a fox-length of space between the pair. *Why is Urchinkit here?* Hazekit wondered. *This is* my *apprentice ceremony. Not that half clan rat's!*

Wavestar straightened up on his perch, his tail swaying to-and-fro as he began to speak. "Today is a special day in a young cat's life, where a kit leaves the nursery and joins the world as an apprentice. Eelnose, Gullcry, have your kits reached six moons old? And do you believe they are ready to join us and learn the ways of the clan?"

"I do," both queens chimed, sharing a glance. Gullcry smiled warmly at the she-cat while Eelnose looked like she was holding back a sneer. She must not have been happy that Urchinkit was being promoted on the same day that Hazekit was. Hazekit certainly shared her feelings.

"Are you ready to rejoin your peers as warriors once more, or would either of you like to reside as a queen permanently?"

"I would like to return to my warrior duties," Eelnose responded, "Please."

"As would I," Gullcry agreed. "As much as I loved taking care of my son, I'm not to keen on raising kits for a living."

Wavestar chuckled. "Very well. Then with Starclan and Silverpelt as witness, let it be known; from this day forward, these cats shall be recognized as full warriors of Oceanclan once more."

Both warriors bowed their heads respectfully to Wavestar before turning and finding a place among the crowd. Hazekit shimmied with excitement. He knew exactly what he had to do for this part of the ceremony.

"Now, Hazekit, Urchinkit please-"
Hazekit raced closer to the Mighty Dune before Wavestar had a chance to finish his sentence.
"...step...forward."
Meanwhile, Urchinkit waited patiently for his cue, stepping up when he was instructed. He smiled up at Wavestar, keeping his head high. Hazekit slumped down in his place. *Stupid furball, trying to put on a goody two-paws act. I bet he probably held himself back because he's scared.*

Wavestar cleared his throat. "Right, where was I..? Ah, yes. You two

have survived the first six moons of your lives. May Starclan guide your paws from this moment on." Then, he turned his muzzle towards the sky. "From this day forward, until they have earned their warrior names, these apprentices shall be known as the following: Hazekit, from this moment on you will be known as Hazepaw. Sandybreeze will be your mentor. I trust that she will be able to tame that wild spirit of yours and shape it into one that will serve Oceanclan well."
Hazepaw nearly jolted in reply. He had been given to the deputy to train? Sandybreeze was a tough warrior. She was proud and strong willed, much like Hazepaw himself. No doubt she'd be very strict with him. After all, she was stubborn enough to stand up to Wavestar about her place as the clan's future leader. It was a well known fact that she'd go down fighting to keep her position instead of yielding it to Wavestar's next eligible kin, as was tradition. Hazepaw had to admire that about her. He liked the way that Sandybreeze carried herself, and how sure she was of her goals. Hazepaw was certain he could handle her as his mentor.
Turning, Hazepaw met with the sand colored she-cat, keeping his head high just as his mother had taught him. Sandybreeze said nothing as she stepped up, touching her nose against his. She moved back afterwards, staring the new apprentice down. Hazepaw did not falter under her gaze. He would not allow himself to be intimidated. Instead, he lifted his chin higher, narrowing his eyes at the she-cat challengingly. Sandybreeze smirked in approval. With a flick of her tail, the deputy commanded her new apprentice to join her to sit at the front of the crowd. Hazepaw followed without question, watching the rest of the ceremony unfold seated beside her.

"And Urchinkit, from this moment on you will be known as Urchinpaw. Silverdrop will mentor you. I know she will do well with teaching you and integrating you fully into Oceanclan," Wavestar concluded. Hazepaw watched as the silver spotted warrior, Silverdrop, shouldered her way to the base of the Mighty Dune. She smiled, touching noses with Urchinpaw. Then she whispered something into his ear before leading him over to their clanmates. She didn't even take the time to size him up. *How lame*.

"Hazepaw! Urchinpaw! Hazepaw! Urchinpaw" caterwauled the clan.

Cats congratulated the new apprentices as they went on their way, returning to their duties. Urchinpaw worked to thank everyone who welcomed him, while Hazepaw kept silent beside his mentor.

"Ah suppose we aught ta take these two scraps out fer their first tour of tha territory?" Silverdrop asked Sandybreeze, standing beside her now. "Unless yer plannin' ta start with trainin' already."

"Touring sounds good," Sandybreeze agreed. "The apprentices will have to learn where they're going at some point. Might as well get it out of the way and save time for training later."

"Lead tha way then, o' wise an' powerful leader," Silverdrop insisted playfully, bowing her head for emphasis. Sandybreeze rolled her eyes, gently cuffing the other molly's ear before beckoning Hazepaw once more. Hazepaw padded alongside her as the patrol left the safety of the Twoleg Settlement Bridge. His fur bristled ever so slightly with excitement as they made their way onto the beach, drawing closer to the large body of water which bordered the horizon. Hazepaw recognized the sound of the waves washing against the shore as they approach. It was the first noise he heard when his ears opened as a kit. And it was the last sound he'd listen to as he fell asleep at night. The rhythmic push and pull of the water had been a comfort his whole life.

"Not that it needs much explanation, but this is the ocean," Sandybreeze announced once the patrol had paused a bear-length from the water's reach. The air felt sharp here, tangy and salty like the pelts of his clanmates. Hazepaw had never been this close to ocean before. But somehow he felt connected to it. Like the waves were part of him, coursing through his veins. Something seemed to compell him towards it. Sandybreeze blocked him with her tail. "Easy there, 'Paw, you'll get your chance to swim in it later. We're moving on for now."
Hazepaw nodded in understanding, following behind the others as they traveled along the shore. A few tree-lengths ahead, Hazepaw could make out a familiar cluster of rocks.

"Aren't those the tide pools?" Hazepaw questioned.

"Yes, they are. Good memory," Silverdrop praised with a trill.

"You've been here before?" Urchinpaw wondered aloud. Hazepaw glanced at him like he'd grown a second head. Was the other tom really so dense and forgetful?

"Duh. It's where I learned to swim. *Every* Oceanclan kit comes here by their second moon for lessons." Hazepaw snarkily responded.

"Gullcry never took me," Urchinpaw admitted. He looked embarrassed by that fact, although it was obvious that he was trying to hide it.

Hazepaw resisted the urge to snicker. "You really never learned how to swim?"

Urchinpaw growled, raising part of his upper lip to flash his fangs. "What's it matter to you, fish-brain? Doesn't make me any less of an Oceanclan cat. Besides, I'll learn how to now that I'm an apprentice. Silverdrop, you'll teach me, won't you?"

"Guess ah'll have ta," Silverdrop replied, her tone sounding a little surprised. Urchinpaw wasn't her first outsider apprentice, but he was the first to be with the clan since kithood. Maybe she had hoped he'd at least know how to swim by now, given that fact. But Silverdrop didn't sound burdened having to add swimming to her lesson plan for the spikey black tom. She was patient enough to go through it. Although Hazepaw thought she was more of a pushover, having to fulfill a task that Gullcry should have completed long before his son was even considered for promotion to apprenticeship. With the apprentices already knowing the landmark which lay in front of them, Sandybreeze led the patrol even further along the beach. They began to draw closer to a part of the Twoleg Settlement Bridge which jutted out into the water. Large tree trunks kept the wooden walkway steady in the waves. On top of it, Twolegs flitted to-and-fro, conducting their business. Some seemed to be tending to giant white sea monsters which huddled around the edge of the bridge. While others conversed with each other, gawking at fish held between their weirdly shaped paws. Hazepaw gazed on in fascination.

"This right here, young ones, is what the Twolegs call a dock. They use it to gain access to their boats which help them travel across the

ocean. They also use this area for fishing, and to trade fish to other Twolegs for trinkets," explained Oceanclan's deputy, pointing her muzzle towards the commotion on the upperside of the bridge.

"Wow, boats really grow that big?" Hazepaw queried. He'd only ever seen the boat that was used as the elder's den. It was ant sized compared to some of the boats alive in the water at the dock.

"That's right," Silverdrop praised. "And they're loud sometimes, but harmless as long as ya don' go swimmin near 'em. Or try ta take a ride on their back."

"Do you think we could snag some fish from the Twolegs while we're here?" Urchinpaw piped suddenly, licking his lips. Even at this distance, the smell of prey was unmistakable. Hazepaw too found his mouth watering a little at the thought of taking a couple of tasty fish.

"These types of Twolegs aren't usually the sort to share their food. It would be safer to avoid the fishermen if you can help it," Sandybreeze answered as she beckoned the others to follow her away.
The patrol turned, retreating back to the safety of Settlement Bridge. They traveled in the opposite direction of the ocean, soon leaving behind the familiar Twoleg inhabited territory in order to explore more wild terrain. The beach began to give way to foliage; grasses and other low growing plants that Hazepaw had only heard stories of. Eventually, the patrol came upon a collection of trees which towered high above their heads. Hazepaw tilted his muzzle back to look up at the barren canopy in awe. Here, rich murky scents of soil and prey filtered through his nostrils. Though there was still a dampness to the air--likely from recently melted snow--the moisture seemed sweet in comparison to that which the tom was used to. In the background, the faintest bit of birdsong could be picked up.

"Welcome to tha Forest Patch," Silverdrop meowed as they padded deeper into the woods. The ground underpaw shifted from comforting sand to squishy earth and plant matter. And the familiarness of the beach disappeared behind a wall of tree trunks. Hazepaw started to feel uneasy. But his curiosity held strong,

keeping him from cowering like a kit beside his mentor. *I'm not afraid,* he assured himself. *This is nothing. In fact, I like it here!* Hazepaw tried to convince himself, but he knew deep down he'd always feel more comfortable on the warmth of the sand than in the shade of the forest.
The patrol followed a well worn path up a slope, along the side of a black stone river.

"To your right, you can see the road," Sandybreeze told the apprentices as they trekked onward. "The other clans call it a Thunder Path. Twolegs drive their cars along it. Living ones are loud, but they won't hunt you if you stay out of their designated path."

Hazepaw looked over, seeing a couple of the mentioned monsters zooming past. The smoke they admitted was harsh and foul smelling. Hazepaw held back a coughing fit that threatened to escape from the back of his throat. He felt lucky that they weren't any closer to the strange artificial path. Though he hoped that they wouldn't be following the road much longer. Luckily, the path broke away not too far ahead, leading the Oceanclan cats deeper into the unfamiliar territory of the woods. Occasionally, as they continued with the tour, Sandybreeze or Silverdrop would pause to spray on some trees and rocks. Then they'd move on, taking the apprentices with them. At one point when Sandybreeze stopped to mark the border again, Hazepaw joined her, leaving his own scent on an old stone. Sandybreeze looked at him, nodding her approval. Hazepaw smiled back smugly.
Part of the forest raised into an incline as the patrol moved along, while the path they were set on remained at an even level. The trees up ahead started to thin, and soon sand mingled with the earth underpaw. Before Hazepaw knew it, the patrol was back on the beach. Alongside them, the forest continued to rise, creating a distinctive separation between Treeclan territory and Oceanclan. A little further ahead, a pile of rocks peaked out of the ground. They continued onward up a slope, Hazepaw noticed. Sandybreeze stopped the patrol here. She held out her tail, warning the apprentices not to make a move.

"What is it..?" Urchinpaw whispered to Hazepaw. Hazepaw shook

his head, unsure of what was going on.

"There's a patrol nearby," Silverdrop answered. "Sniff the air, you'll be able ta catch em too."

Hazepaw lifted his muzzle and parted his jaws to taste the air. At first, all he could smell was the sweetness of the forest. But through the earthy scent he caught something unfamiliar. *That's Treeclan?* He wondered. As the smells of the enemy warriors drew closer, the sound of chatter could be made out, becoming clear as the two patrols met. On the cliff above, four cats stood with heads held high; they were completely unaware of how close they were to Oceanclan's patrol. At the head of the Treeclan cats was a firey ginger tom with eyes as orange as the sunset. Beside him was a slightly duller ginger and white cat, who glanced occasionally at two smaller mollies beside her. The larger of the younger set was a tabby and white molly with thick fur and an air of smugness about her. The smallest of the patrol was silver and white with long silky fur and the prettiest green eyes Hazepaw had ever seen. Hazepaw caught himself staring at her. He became lost in his thoughts which ran as rapid as the ocean's current.
When Hazepaw zoned back into reality, his mentor was laughing and Silverdrop was chatting with Treeclan's patrol. The tabby Treeclan apprentice was making a smart remark and Sandybreeze was warning the firey tom, Treeclan's leader Blazestar, to teach the younger cat to watch her tongue. Hazepaw smirked mischievously. He couldn't stop himself from inserting his input into the conversation, even though he had hardly been paying attention. For some reason he was in the mood to show off.

"Yeah, Treeclan cat, shut your trap!" Hazepaw sneered. "Your clan's filled with nothing but deer ticks." Urchinpaw stood beside him, hanging his head at the other tom's remark. Hazepaw could swear he could hear the spikey black tom groan.

"And your head is full of bees," the tabby hissed. "Yknow, I wouldn't be surprised if you've got sand up your-"

"That's enough, Tigerpaw," Blazestar warned, putting his tail in front of the apprentice to hold her back. *So that's that treelicker's name,* Hazepaw thought. What about the other apprentice? Maybe if

Hazepaw kept going with his remarks he could get that information. Maybe he could even tease Tigerpaw enough to make her angry. That would be funny. And it might be fun to get into a border skirmish on the first day out of camp, Hazepaw figured.

"We only came to mark and show off the border," the ginger and white she-cat reminded her clanmates "We should be going now."

Blazestar nodded in agreement. Hazepaw had to hide the slight disappointment he felt following this decision.

"May the branches hold your weight, Sandybreeze, Silverdrop, and 'Paws," Blazestar meowed to Oceanclan's patrol with a dip of his head.

"An' may Starclan light yer path," responded Silverdrop, sweeping her tail to turn Hazepaw and Urchinpaw around. Urchinpaw looked relieved to be heading away from the Forest Patch. But Hazepaw didn't quite share his feelings. He wanted to cause some trouble. As a last ditch effort to do so, Hazepaw turned his head to stick his tongue out at Tigerpaw. Then he glanced at the silver and white she-cat again before finally following his clanmates away.

Chapter 6

Moonkit and her littermates were growing fast, their days in the nursery numbered. It had been nearly a whole moon since Treeclan's incident with the fox occurred. Blazestar had doubled patrols since then. While Silverhawk stood guard of the nursery most nights, worrying by day as her kits grew and became apprentices. Blackpaw and Beepaw had gotten their promotions recently and were out exploring the world. One day, Moonkit watched as the twins took turns picking the elders clean of ticks, faces twisted in disgust. The smaller of the two stuck out his tongue, while his sister laughed at him for forgetting Mothsong's warning about handling mouse bile. Blackpaw groaned, racing off to cleanse his pallet of the vile taste. Beepaw simply shook her head and picked up where her brother left off. Moonkit purred in amusement at the sight. *Someday soon, that'll be me and my siblings*. A bubble of joy floated in her chest at the thought. Then it burst; a thorn of sorrow piercing through as Rainkit came to mind. Moonkit would never get to see her sister again. She wouldn't get the honor of apprentice duties like the rest of their littermates would. She would never be a warrior, or cause mischief, or play ever again. The reality of that still hit hard. Every now and then Moonkit would wake up, plagued by dreams of the night her sister died. She had been right next to Rainkit when the fox came. Had Moonkit shrieked, would she have been torn apart too? Would her littermates be mourning her now, the way she did for Rainkit? The possibility haunted her. But she tried not to let it to come to mind often. She had to keep her chin up. For the sake of her denmates, her mother, and her clan.

Speaking of her mother, Moonkit decided it was time to go and visit her. It had been a while since Brightsky had come out from the nursery. Moonkit bet she would appreciate some company.

With a determined bounce in her step, Moonkit made her way over to the overgrown tree roots, down the slope and padded into the nursery. The den was dimly lit during this time of day. Faint beams of sunlight cast against the walls, highlighting the leftover remenents of that dreadful night. Blood still stained the roots and

dusty floor underpaw. The nursery continued to hold onto the stench of fox and fearscent. But there was evidence of a coverup. Scrub marks streaked through crusty brown splatters, proof that the warriors had tried cleaning up the walls with wet moss. Wisteria flowers had been planted just outside, entangling the tree and covering up musky odors with a floral fragrance. They were signs that the clan was healing. But, like the pain, the leftovers from that faithful night could not be so easily erased. And that sentiment showed itself within the cats most effected by it.
Brightsky lay silently in her nest by the farthest corner of the den. Her back faced the world beyond her shelter, blocking it from her view. Only the steady rise and fall of her flank proved that she had not turned to stone while sinking into her sorrow. She'd hardly moved from her spot in days. Moonkit felt terrible for her mother. It was hard enough to lose a sister. She could only imagine what the agony of losing a kit might feel like.

Softly, Moonkit padded up to Brightsky. She reached out a paw, touching it to her shoulder "Hi, mama," She trilled quietly, a sunshine bright smile on her face. Brightsky shrieked, nearly jumping out of her fur. She threw Moonkit away from her, whipping around with claws unsheathed. But after a heartbeat the queen came back to her senses, looking down at the kit that lay near her resting place.
Moonkit stared up at her mother with wide eyes, sitting back upright. *She must have been sleeping*, Moonkit figured. *Have I woken her from a nightmare?*

"Moonkit..!" Brightsky breathed, pulling the kit to her chest, resting her forepaw along her shoulders.

"I'm sorry mama, I didn't mean to startle you," Moonkit mewed, still looking up at her mother.

Brightsky purred, rasping her tongue between her daughter's ears. "It's alright, chipmunk, I know. I'm sorry for reacting the way that I did. I didn't mean to frighten you either."

"I don't get scared, so it's ok," Moonkit assured. "Are you, though?"

Brightsky hesitated to answer. She spent a few more heartbeats

grooming Moonkit before speaking up again. "...I will be. With time."

Moonkit whimpered a little. That's what Brightsky had said last time, too. Moonkit was beginning to grow worried. It wasn't like her mother to sulk, or to be so jumpy when touched. But she knew that Brightsky was strong. She was fighting her depression as best as she could. Even if little progress had been made, Moonkit could tell she was getting better. This was the first time in a half moon that Brightsky had spoken more than a couple of words. Maybe tomorrow, Moonkit could convince her to sit outside. For now, the little silver and white kit figured she should probably give Brightsky more space; despite the sadness it brought her to leave her grieving mother alone.

"Alright..." Moonkit wiggled out of the older molly's grasp. "I just wanted to check on you. I'm glad that you're up now. Maybe later we can share prey together?"

"That sounds nice," Brightsky agreed with another purr. Moonkit smiled.

"Great! I'll be back by sunhigh." Moonkit stepped up to touch noses with her mother. Then she licked her cheeks before backing away again. "I love you, mama."

"I love you too," Brightsky responded. She made a small noise like she was holding back a sob. And tears seem to prick the edges of her eyes. Moonkit couldn't tell what emotion that stemmed from, but she hoped it was happiness. Even if Rainkit was gone, Brightsky still had Moonkit and the rest of her littermates to love and care for. And they all loved their mother just the same.
With a tail flick Moonkit made her way back out of the nursery and into the chill of the morning. The camp wasn't as busy as when she had gone to visit Brightsky. Moonkit figured the hunting patrols must have been sent out a short while ago. Come sunhigh, the clearing would be flooded with cats. But for now, only a few lingered about. One of those cats was Tigerkit. She was chasing her only sister Tinkykit around, swiping to catch her tail as if it were a prized mouse. Tinykit squealed, trying her best to avoid her larger sibling. But she was no match for Tigerkit's speed, and soon, Tinykit

found herself pinned. Tigerkit yowled out triumphantly, laughing a hardy warrior's laugh.
Moonkit purred in amusement. Despite everything, she noted that Tigerkit seemed unaffected by the occurrence that took place the previous moon. In fact, she seemed even feistier than before. She was determined to be brave and remain strong just as her mother had until the very end. Moonkit admired Tigerkit for that. For being able to come out of a bad experience stronger than before, despite the pain. *I hope I can learn to be that resilient*, she thought with a small sigh.

"I'm going to become the greatest warrior in the Land's Star! I'll be skilled at everything; leading, fighting, hunting, den keeping, spying, and guarding!" Tigerkit proclaimed to Moonkit one day while they were play fighting just outside of the nursery. "And one day, I'll be Treeclan's leader. You'll all have to call me Tigerstar soon!"

"I know you will be, Tig. I believe in you!" Moonkit purred in reply, nipping the tabby and white mollykit's ear playfully.

"Then if you're going to be the best in the Land's Star, at least let me be the best in Treeclan," said another kit who came to join them; a ginger and white tom named Sunkit. Moonkit purred a greeting, a warm feeling pooling in her chest at the sight of him.

"Oh please. You have to actually be skilled to be the best," Tigerkit joked, batting at Sunkit with a white paw, claws sheathed. "You're as clumsy as a lopsided, one-eyed badger."
Sunkit huffed, hopping on top of the mollykits, creating a kitten pile. Tigerkit shrieked from the added weight on her back.

"What can I be?" A fourth cat asked, inviting himself into the conversation. It was one of the new apprentices, Blackpaw. Moonkit wasn't exactly close with him. But she knew he was friends with her friends. And so, the young tom was allowed to join their group whenever he had the free time. Blackpaw plopped down on top of the others, squishing everyone below him. Tigerkit and Sunkit both squeaked out in annoyance. But the complaints seemed to fall on deaf ears. Blackpaw simply purred, happy to be included.

"You can sit with me on the sidelines cheering them on," Moonkit suggested, wiggling to get more comfortable as the base of the kitten pile.

"No way! I think I want to be a deputy like my father, Thornberry," Blackpaw replied, sitting up to lick his fluffy black chest fur, his paws pressing down into Sunkit's rump.

"Is that possible?" Moonkit wondered. "If Thornberry becomes Thornstar, I don't think he can choose one of his kits to succeed him," she noted, rolling over. As she cralwed away the kitten pile came undone, leaving a mess of kits sprawled out on the earth.

"Well Blackpaw doesn't have to worry about that." Tigerkit sat up and puffed up her chest fur. "*I* will be the leader after Thornberry. So I'll be the one picking a deputy."

Blackpaw tilted his head. "Well can I be *your* deputy then?"

Tigerkit thought for a moment before replying, "Maybe. If you try really really hard and fight lots of warriors."

"Hey, stop trying to kill off my dad. He still has many seasons left in him. Thornberry will probably retire before my dad joins Starclan," Sunkit growled defensively.

Blackpaw let out an amused *mrrow* of laughter, "Maybe while I wait to become deputy, I'll be a Guard warrior. That could be fun." Sunkit hissed playfully, batting at Blackpaw's nubby tail. Blackpaw turned around to defend himself, rolling the ginger and white tomkit onto his side. Blackpaw jumped onto him and the two began to tussle around on the damp grass.

"Let all cats old enough to climb through the trees gather here beneath the Great Stump for a clan meeting," Blazestar called. Sunkit paused in his play and gasped, his green eyes going wide.

"My apprentice ceremony! I forgot!" he yowled, jumping up and rushing into the nursery to get some last minute grooming from Leafheart. His fur was messy, covered in bits of dead grass and mud. Moonkit knew his mom would be mad at him for it. She

giggled at the sight, walking with Tigerkit and Blackpaw to the front of the crowd to watch. The mollykits were five moons old now, and pretty soon it would be their turn to be apprenticed. Moonkit wished Sparrowkit and Rainkit could be with them, but she knew they'd be watching over them when the day came. Maybe they'd be reincarnated so they could get an apprentice ceremony one day too. A kit could dream.

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The last moon of their kithood seemed to fly in the blink of an eye. The faithful day had come for Moonkit and her littermates to become apprentices. Tigerkit, too, would earn her promotion this day. After being held back an extra half moon, she was finally ready to graduate.
Brightsky seemed to cheer up in time for the ceremony. The pain in her gaze was still evident. But Moonkit could tell that her mother was excited for this moment. She diligently groomed all of their fluffy fur, then walked her litter and Tigerkit out to the Great Stump as the meeting began. A chilly Newleaf breeze ruffled through the clan cats' fur. Change was in the air, and all the new apprentices meant great news for Treeclan.
Blazestar began the ceremony as he had the others before. Brightsky chose to remain a queen permanently, padding back to the front of the nursery. She sat herself next to Mapleshine and Silverhawk, watching her four kittens with love shining in her blue eyes.

"You have survived the first six moons of your lives. May Starclan guide your paws from this moment on," Blazestar meowed. "Smokekit, from this point on you shall be known as Smokepaw. Shadeleaf, I think it's time for you to receive your first apprentice. You had a wonderful mentor in Wolfheart, and I trust you will pass on the knowledge you gained from him to young Smokepaw."
The tom in question bounced happily up to the tortoiseshell she-cat. His nose squished awkwardly against hers as they met, his eagerness getting the better of him. Shadeleaf simply chuckled, leading Smokepaw towards their gathered clanmates.
Blazestar went on; "Skunk-kit, from this point on you shall be known as Skunkpaw. Silverhawk, I trust you can juggle your duties as Den Mother and help whip this young cat into shape. Train him

well."
Silverhawk perked up in surprise, standing and making her way to the front of the crowd. Skunkpaw waited for her patiently, lifting their chin to touch noses with Den Mother as soon as she came. Once they moved aside, Blazestar focused on the next new apprentice.
"Magpiekit, from this point on you shall be known as Magpiepaw," he declared. "Pepperpatch, I think it's time you received your first apprentice as well. Train her to the best of your ability, just as Galestorm had trained you."
With ears lowered slightly, Magpiepaw moved to touch noses with her new mentor. Her paws kneaded at the ground as she waited for Pepperpatch's first instructions.

"It's ok, little bird. You're doing fine," Pepperpatch reassured her softly. Magpiepaw perked up, her posture becomong more relaxed. She moved away with her mentor in tow, passing the spotlight onto her sister.

"Moonkit, from this point on you shall be known as Moonpaw. Leafheart, I trust you to train this apprentice," Blazestar decided. "Guide her paws on the path to become a great warrior like you."
Moonpaw shimmied, proudly stepping up to the ginger and white she-cat to touched noses. It was an honor to have such a highly regarded cat as a mentor. Moonpaw hoped not to disappoint. After a heartbeat, the pair made their way to the front of the crowd to observe the last of the apprentice ceremony.
Tigerkit sat alone. Her tail swept across the ground; whether it was from impatience or nervousness was unclear. Moonpaw wondered who Tigerkit would receive as a mentor. There weren't many cats left who didn't already have an apprentice to train. Would she receive someone who would be able to tame her wild spirit?
"Finally, Tigerkit. Previously you were held back in the nursery, as punishment for your wreckless behavior. I'm certain you've learned you lesson now. And so, for your patience, I finally name you Tigerpaw. I believe you deserve a mentor who will challenge and push you in the way you need. And that it why I have decided to take you on as *my* apprentice."
Tigerpaw jumped to her paws, wide eyed and mouth agape at the announcement. Moonpaw beamed, excited for her best friend. To

her, no one could be a better choice to train the young tabby. Blazestar jumped down from the Great Stump to touch noses with his new apprentice, thus concluding the ceremony. The clan broke out into a cheer, brightening the new apprentices' spirits.

"Smokepaw! Skunkpaw! Magpiepaw! Moonpaw! Tigerpaw!!"

"Come, Tigerpaw. It's time for you to see the territory. Leafheart, Moonpaw, care to join us?" Meowed Blazestar, walking up to the mollies. Tigerpaw eagerly kneaded the ground, and Leafheart nodded her head.

"We would be delighted to," she accepted.
Together, the four cats made their way to the Entrance Tree and climbed their way up to its branches.

"Today you will learn the territory from down here," Leafheart said, leading the patrol to the ground outside of camp. "That way you will know where you are in case it's too dangerous to travel by tree."
Moonpaw and Tigerpaw stared at the forest around them with amazement. The territory was far bigger and brighter than either had remembered. Perhaps it was because the last time they'd stepped paw out of camp, the forest had been been a wonderland of white. The woods looked far more magnificent without a snowy blanket to hide all the details. There was so much greenery, and so much land to explore. Moonpaw couldn't wait to learn about every pawprint of it.
The patrol of cats walked for quite a while. Leafheart would point out small landmarks that the apprentices should remember. An extra large boulder here, a gnarled misshaped tree there. Eventually they came to a stop in a more important area which required better explanation.

"This place is called the Tree Dome. It's named for the way the trees are shaped. Here, you will learn to fight, utilizing the terrain you have available to you," Blazestar retorted, gesturing to the large sandy hollow they were standing in.
The trees surrounding the clearing arched inward, like a great force had bent them to create a shelter. In the center there was plenty of space to move around. At the edges a warrior could touch the trees'

branches simply by standing on their hind legs. Prey like squirrels and birds would probably be easy to catch here, if the hollow didn't smell so strongly of cats. The leaves in Greenleaf would make for great cover from predator and enemy alike. It was the perfect place for a Treeclan apprentice to train.

"It's amazing!" Moonpaw trilled with delight, spinning in a circle as if she were trying to take in the full view of the area. Leafheart chuckled and beckoned the others onward.
The patrol continued the tour heading northward, pausing on occasion to mark the border. Ahead, the land started to slope upwards, leading the cats along the edge of a cliff. Not much farther along, a strange scent began to mingle with the breeze. It grew stronger as they went along, becoming more unavoidable by the heartbeat. Moonpaw's nose wrinkled when she caught a big enough whiff of the odor while Tigerpaw sneezed.

"Oh Starclan, what *is* that?" Tigerpaw griped. The older cats chose not to explain right away. Instead, they held out until they slowed atop the highest point of the cliff. Here sat an an old tree. It's limbs hung like a weeping willow. Yet its branches were girthier with larger leaf buds protruding from its Newleaf growths. A part of its trunk bore a prominent scar at the bend. It looked as if the tree had been struck by lightning once. It healed from its injury, but was never quite able to return to it's full upright glory.

"This is the High Cliff, it's marked by the Saggy Tree. The forest once extended to this point. Now, all that remains here is this lone ash. A fire broke out during a storm once, destroying everything but the tree that started it all," Blazestar explained.

"Breathe deep, 'paws. The scent you caught on the wind is the stench of Oceanclan," chimed Leafheart. "Learn it quickly. You need to know it to identify your enemies."

"Let's continue along the border this way," Blazestar suggested, pointing to the right with his tail. The group moved away from the High Cliff, down a slight slope to the edge of a rocky area a couple tree lengths away. Blazestar waved his tail to signal for the group to pause once more.

"This is the Rubble Path. A great area to sunbathe and hunt, but also a dangerous place. Adders sometimes live in between the rocks, and this land is often fought for by Oceanclan. Many battles have taken place on this land, and much blood has been shed. Mark the trees and rocks around here well whenever you pass, and always keep an eye out for trouble," Blazestar meowed, walking up to a tree to spray. Just then, a *mrrow* of laughter sounded from the base of Rubble Path.

"You make us sound so evil, Blazestar," remarked an unfamiliar golden she-cat. Her long fur flowed in the breeze as her paw rested on one of the stones. She had three cats backing her up with varying degrees of emotion on their faces.

"It's an Oceanclan patrol. That she-cat is their deputy, Sandybreeze," hissed Leafheart into the apprentices ears. Tigerpaw let out an involuntary growl, and Moonpaw lashed her tail.

"Ah don' recognize those two. Showin' yer new apprentices 'round personally?" wondered a molly with gray fur and black tabby spots.

"It's customary for a mentor to show his apprentice around," Blazestar responded simply. Moonpaw watched Tigerpaw step forward next to the leader with her head held high. *Please don't say anything rash...*

"He doesn't need stinky old Oceanclan's approval to train me now, does he?" She snickered, flashing a smug toothy grin. Moonpaw tilted her head, wondering how Tigerpaw could be so bold. The enemy patrol seemed to take the remark with good humor.

"Your apprentice has guts, Blazestar. I can see why you've chosen to mentor her. Though you might want to teach her to watch her tongue. It's going to lead her to trouble sooner or later," advised Sandybreeze.

"Yeah, Treeclan cat, shut your trap!" Piped the third cat, a fluffy white tom. He was smaller than the she-cats were. Moonpaw wondered if he had just been made an apprentice too. "Your clan's filled with nothing but deer ticks." The similarly sized black tom beside him hung his head with a slow shake.

"And your head is full of bees," Tigerpaw spat back in response. "Yknow, I wouldn't be surprised if you've got sand up your-"

"That's enough, Tigerpaw," Blazestar warned, holding his tail in front of her.

"We didn't come here to throw jabs at one another. Only to mark and show off the border," Leafheart chimed in. "We should be going now. I think to the Twoleg border next."

Blazestar nodded in agreement. "May the branches hold your weight, Sandybreeze, Silverdrop, and 'Paws."

"An' may Starclan light yer path," responded Silverdrop, turning her apprentices around. The white tom turned his head to look back at the Treeclan patrol. He stuck his tongue out at Tigerpaw then put it away, locking eyes with Moonpaw. His gaze shifted to one of intrigue, and Moonpaw felt curiosity rise up within herself as well. After another heatbeat she turned, following her clanmates to another part of the territory.

Chapter 7

Hazepaw felt something stir within him as his patrol headed further away from Treeclan's border. Intrigue lingered deep within his heart for the silver she-cat he'd just met. But so did a more surface level annoyance towards that striped apprentice. *How dare that fleabag Tigerpaw accuse me of having bees in my head! Who does that sap sipper think she is? Other than Blazestar's apprentice...* Hazepaw let out a snort, shaking out his pelt. Relief flooded through him when he realized the tour of the territory was concluded for the day, and now the patrol could head home. He was exhausted from all of the walking, and wanted nothing more than to nap somewhere.
When Oceanclan's camp came into his view, Hazepaw started trotting farther ahead of everyone else. As he returned to the familiarity of his home, he could see several of his clanmates gathered in the clearing. They were all staring up at the Mighty Dune. Had another clan meeting been called?
Hazepaw padded over to join, weaving himself around a few warriors to get a good seat in the crowd. From here, he could see the base of the Mighty Dune. In front of it, he could just make out the rich brown pelt of a cat he did not recognize. Hazepaw gave a sniff. The mystery cat didn't smell like they were from the beach. Nor did they smell funny the way kittypets were described. Where had this cat come from?

"Oceanclan, I have called this meeting to introduce you to this young cat you see before us. Today, she will be joining our ranks. She has taken quite the journey to reach us. And her decision to come here was not made lightly, either. I expect you all to treat her as you would any other apprentice," Wavestar began, placing his gaze upon the unfamiliar she-cat. "So without further adue; from this day forward, until she has earned her warrior name, this apprentice will be known as Otterpaw. Kinkfoot will be her mentor. She has had much experience with apprentices, both clanborn and outsider. I trust that she will be able to teach young Otterpaw our way of life, and make a fine Oceanclan warrior out of her."

The crowd parted to allow Kinkfoot through. The senior warrior hobbled to the base of the Mighty Dune where the apprentice waited. Otterpaw turned, an eager expression on her face as she met with her mentor for the first time and touched noses. They stepped away from each other, allowing Kinkfoot to size up the lithe she-cat. She meowed something to the younger molly that Hazepaw didn't bother to pay attention to before the clan began to cheer.

"Otterpaw! Otterpaw! Otterpaw!"

Hazepaw didn't know what to think. Not only was this stranger brought into their ranks, but she was an apprentice too? With an official clan name no less? Who was this cat?
Hazepaw watched as Urchinpaw padded up to the strange molly. He gave her a sniff, the tension in his shoulders subsiding after a few moments.

"Hey. I'm Urchinpaw," greeted the wiry black tom. "Welcome to Oceanclan. Want a tour of the camp?"

The lithe brown she-cat shrugged nonchalantly. "Sure." Her head was tilted slightly, as if she didn't expect such a casual welcome from her new clanmate. Hazepaw couldn't have predicted it either. Urchinpaw wasn't known for being friendly after all. Perhaps he was hoping to gain something from this new she-cat?
Urchinpaw moved ahead of Otterpaw at once, prompting her to follow with a flick of his tail. Otterpaw trotted after him, matching the tom's pace easily.

"So, where are you from?" Hazepaw heard his clanmate ask as they passed by him.

"I came from Grassclan," Otterpaw responded, as if it weren't much of a big deal. *She's a traitor?* Hazepaw wondered. It was the only explanation for Otterpaw switching to Oceanclan. Apprentices rarely trained outside the land of their birth. Only fully grown cats would switch clans, and it was usually to be with a cross-clan mate.

"What made you want to leave?" Urchinpaw asked the question that Hazepaw was itching to have an answer to. "I heard Grassclan can

be kind of stuck up, but I never thought that would drive an apprentice to switch clans."

"My dad lives here. I wanted to be with him," Otterpaw answered simply. Her expression was neutral, but Hazepaw managed to catch a glimpse of a hidden emotion in the she-cat's eyes. Hazepaw had seen it once before in Gullcry. Grief. What was there for this stranger to be mournful of?

"You're...like me, aren't you?" Urchinpaw asked her, voice airy. He must have caught on to what Hazepaw had.

Otterpaw seemed to tense a little bit, her movements becoming more rigid. "...Depends on what you mean."

"You're halfclan," Urchinpaw elaborated. "So am I. My mother lives in Mountainclan. My father lives here. And I'm willing to bet that we have similar reasons for coming to Oceanclan." Urchinpaw leaned closer to the molly, dropping his voice to a whisper. Otterpaw replied to him in the same tone, making it impossible for Hazepaw to catch what they might be saying now. As they moved on through the camp it became even harder for the white tom to eavesdrop, even when the apprentices had gone back to their normal speaking tones. Hazepaw huffed, a little annoyed that he could not investigate the stranger in the way that he had planned. At least, not without having to talk to her himself. Or stalk her, like some creep. But he'd rather not do that. Not right now, not unless there was a good reason for it.

"Ey, Hazepaw!" Hazepaw heard Currentkit calling beside the apprentice's den."Wanna play Follow The Crab with us?" He offered, his paw holding a hermit crab captive beneath it. The kit's sisters poked their heads out from behind him. Hazepaw smiled, prancing over to join the others in their game. For now he'd push his curiosity about Otterpaw to the side, knowing he'd have all the time in the world to learn about her when he was ready.

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A half moon had passed. Hazepaw was by Rubble Path, sniffing out a stray mouse. It was his first solo hunt, and the tom was
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determined to bring something back worthwhile. The creature he had spotted was very plump. It could feed a queen and their entire litter if he could nab it! And then Hazepaw would have the rights to brag to the other apprentices about his impressive catch. Otterpaw would be so jealous. Urchinpaw might claim that he could catch something better, even if he knew he couldn't. Whisperkit would be blown away by the size of the mouse. Currentkit would praise his skill. And Stonekit would probably beg Hazepaw to teach her how to hunt land prey.

Hazepaw could already feel his pelt heating with a sense of accomplishment. He wanted this catch so bad, he could taste it.

A bear-length off, he managed to spot his prized mouse again. It was on a rock, nibbling a seed; blissfully unaware of the danger that was lurking a few pawsteps away. Hazepaw dropped into a crouch, slinking closer to the little brown morsal. With every twitch of it's whiskers, he paused. The last thing he wanted was to scare the mouse away. So he took his time, inchworming closer until it was almost within his grasp. Hazepaw gathered his haunches at last ready to pounce, when the mouse stood up to leave. With its seed finished, there was nothing of interest to keep the little creature here. So it scurried off, heading in the opposite direction of Hazepaw.

Hazepaw bolted from his spot like a flash of lightning, unable to hold himself back. Any more hesitation and he'd lose his catch for sure.

Sensing the danger behind it, the chubby mouse pelted away as fast as it's legs could carry it. It ran towards the Rubble Path, crossing the scent markers into Treeclan territory. A world of which the apprentice could not enter. Hazepaw skidded to a halt at the bottom of the hill, panting. A growl rose from his throat as he watched his prize head towards the woods beyond.

Just then, a cat sprung from the bushes, landing on the mouse. They grabbed the little morsal by the spine, ending its miserable existence in one bite. Hazepaw recognized the cat who had stolen his prey. It was one of the Treeclan apprentices he had met on his first border patrol. The pretty silver one.

"Better luck next time," the apprentice purred as she stood upright, licking her lips. She looked down at Hazepaw, flashing a cheeky smile. Her tail was raised triumphantly, and Hazepaw wanted

nothing more in that moment than to rip it off of her.

"That's Oceanclan prey yknow," he told her, trying to sound intimidating. "Do I have to tell my clanmates that Treeclan's stealing from us again? I'd hate for a fight to break out over one little mouse."

"I haven't stolen anything. I caught it on the *Treeclan* side of the border. Once prey crosses the scent markers it becomes ours. Just as anything that wanders from the forest to the beach becomes food for Oceanclan to take," the molly replied, undeterred by Hazepaw's attempt at a threat. "Besides, since it's just 'one little mouse', I'm sure you can go and find another one."

"Yeah- well... I wanted *that* one!" Hazepaw faltered, unable to think of a quip to throw back at silver and white molly.

"You know, any other time I'd be *glad* to give back 'stolen' prey. Especially when it's would-be-hunter acts so kit-like over losing it. But I seem to recall you being a real jerk the last time we met," the she-cat mused. "Let's see. What was it you called my clan..? Oh yeah...'a bunch of deer ticks'?" Her voice was filled with amusement, a playful glint twinkling in her green eyes. The molly wrapped her fluffy tail neatly around her paws and sat down at the top of the hill. She looked like she was getting comfortable.
This helped Hazepaw relax a little as well. Perhaps he *was* getting too worked up over one stupid mouse. The Treeclan apprentice was right after all, he could find another. But Hazepaw wasn't ready to admit that out loud. Still, now he felt a little guilty over the comment he had made a half moon back. This cat didn't act the way his mother had described Treeclan to behave. She was witty, and didn't seem to mind his previous hostility. She remained calm, and even managed to have some fun as his expense. She wasn't a thief or a parasite all.

"Well, uh, I guess not all of you are deer ticks..." Hazepaw mumbled, lowering his gaze.

The molly giggled. "You're a silly tom. What's your name?"

"Hazepaw," he responded, lifting his chin. "I don't recall catching

yours before either."

"It's Moonpaw," she replied with a purr. "So, Hazepaw, how long have you been training?"

"Only half a moon. Why, do I look close to a warrior yet?"

Moonpaw giggled once again, the sound so pleasant and sweet in Hazepaw's ears. "Not with the way you stalk mice you don't. Maybe you should stick to catching fish if you're going to move so slug-slow, hm?"
Hazepaw's pelt became hot with embarrassment.
"I've been training for half a moon as well, and even I know to move quickly when catching one."
Of course Moonpaw knew how to catch a mouse better than he did. However, it didn't mean that Hazepaw couldn't. It had to be a fluke that he missed. It had to!
"If you want, I could show you the Treeclan Hunter's Crouch, if that would be more effective for you?" Moonpaw offered.

"You'd share your clan's special hunting technique with me?" Hazepaw asked doubtfully.

"Yes. It isn't exactly a secret hunting style. Cats outside of Treeclan use it sometimes. There's myths of a clan in a far away forest that utilizes it, too."

Hazepaw twitched his whiskers. "You don't say?"
Moonpaw let out an agreeable hum, rising to her paws. Carefully she picked her way over the rocks, down the hill. She was well past the border at this point, yet Hazepaw felt no need to stop her.

"Now, do you want me to show you or not?"
Hazepaw was hesitant to accept the offer. But thinking about that plump mouse for a heartbeat brought back his motivation. The fluffy white tom nodded his head enthusiastically, which only made Moonpaw giggle more. Hazepaw felt something stir inside of him when he heard the sound. He couldn't put a paw on what that feeling was though. Annoyance? Probably not. Indigestion? Maybe.
"Come here, Hazepaw," Moonpaw summoned, as she settled on the sand at the base of Rubble Path. Hazepaw hesitated where he stood,

soon giving in and coming as close to the Moonpaw as he dare get. The last thing he wanted was to have Treeclan scent on his pelt. That might make his clanmates suspicious. Especially since he was supposed to be hunting alone. "Follow my moves as closely as you can, and listen to my instructions. Alright?"

"I'll try," Hazepaw agreed, watching as the pretty she-cat began to crouch.

"You need to get low to the ground, but stay light on your paws. Don't let your body or tail drag though, because a mouse will sense your movements through the earth. And you have to act fast, because mice are a lot quicker than you'd think," Moonpaw explained.
Hazepaw tried to copy her posture, keeping his body low, spine equal to the ground. But he kept his belly from brushing the sand beneath, and held up his tail slightly.
Moonpaw gave him an approving nod as she continued. "When you're just a tail-length or so away from your target, strike out as fast as you can with your paws. I find grabbing for the mouse is most effective. But my mentor tends to knock the mouse over first so it'll be harder for it to run away. Anyways-- once you've got a hold of your prey, pull it to you and nip the base of it's spine. That's how you'll get the fastest and cleanest kill." Moonpaw turned away as soon as she'd finished speaking. She raced back to the top of the hill, back onto Treeclan territory.
"Think fast!" She meowed suddenly, throwing the mouse she'd caught at Hazepaw.
Hazepaw struck out at once, catching it just as the molly had instructed. He pretended to sever its spine then picked it up, carrying it with him up the hill. In the moment, he had completely forgotten about where the Oceanclan border was.

"Here," he said as he was about to put down the mouse.

"Oh no, you don't have to give it back. I threw it at you on purpose. You worked to catch that mouse. And I think you deserve it now." Moonpaw smiled, swishing her tail insistently.

Hazepaw blinked at her, looking from the prey back to the she-cat. "...Thanks," he muttered around its scruff.

"Don't mention it," Moonpaw purred, touching her nose to Hazepaw's briefly."I'd better get back to hunting. I hope I get to see you again soon. It was nice meeting you, Hazepaw."

"Yeah, you too," he responded as he watched his new friend turn away into the forest. A hollow feeling filled Hazepaw's insides as he found himself alone again. He lingered by the top of the hill just a few moments longer before finally returning to the beach. He was happy now, he could show off the fat mouse and brag to his peers. But he knew those rights were not his to hold. He understood he could never admit who the true catcher of this prize was, either. He'd never live it down if any if his clanmates found out he accepted prey from a Treeclan cat. And he'd surely be mocked by Urchinpaw if he told him about his interactions with Moonpaw. It was then that Hazepaw decided he would keep his meeting with the silver and white she-cat a secret. And another he planned to keep was the hope that he'd get the chance to talk to her again soon.

Chapter 8

Hazepaw's belly was feeling funny when he made it back to the Twoleg Settlement Bridge. The sensation had started not long ago, but he couldn't understand what was causing it. It wasn't painful, thank Starclan, but it wasn't comfortable either. And since he wasn't suffering, Hazepaw decided not to see Curlear or Bluesky about it. Still, he'd like to know what it was. Maybe he had to make dirt? But Hazepaw hadn't eaten anything today, to ensure his senses would be sharp for his solo hunt. Perhaps he was hungry? The growl rumbling in his gut confirmed this suspicion. Hazepaw decided once he gave his mouse to Beckycreek, he'd grab something for himself. Then he could finally start to feel better.

But thinking about the mouse made Hazepaw's belly feel a little bit worse. It reminded him that this prey was not actually his. It was that Treeclan cat's--Moonpaw's. Did that mean it was actually *guilt* that he was feeling? No. Hazepaw knew what the twist in his belly felt like when he was guilty. This sensation wasn't as sharp, or nauseating. The feeling in Hazepaw's stomach felt as though he'd swallowed a school of tiny fish. It was like they were swimming around in there, their tail fins brushing against his intestines in a way that almost tickled. It was really annoying. Hazepaw tried to push the feeling away as he padded across the camp, up to the abandoned car that made up the nursery.

Inside were the den's remaining residents. Richfur, the Den Mother, was sunbathing up on the flat platform next to the car's front window. And in the makeshift nests below, Beckycreek was busy cleaning her youngest kits. She was diligent in her work, hardly registering the apprentice's appearance. Her older kits, however, took notice.

"Woo, it's Hazepaw!" Cheered the only tom of the litter, Currentkit. He rushed over to greet the fluffy white apprentice, tail held high. His sister Stonekit came crawling out from beneath one of the nests to join him. The last of the litter, Whisperkit, watched from her perch overtop the nests, excitement glittering in her soft yellow eyes. Hazepaw nodded a greeting to each of them as he walked over

to their mother.

"This is for you," he told the queen as he placed his prized mouse in front of her.

Beckycreek purred with gratitude. "Thank you, Hazepaw. It was kind of you to bring us something to eat." Grabbing the mouse, Beckycreek called for the attention of her younger kittens, Turtlekit and Duckkit. "Look my loves, here is some prey for you to try."

Whisperkit leaped down from her perch, into her mother's nest. She smiled, raising her tail. Beckycreek did not look pleased to have the older kitten in her space. "May I have some of that too, mom?" Whisperkit asked sweetly. Her littermates exchanged a look then ran for the nursery's exit.

Beckycreek remained silent for a few moments, tearing off chunks of her meal to share with her little ones. She almost seemed to be ignoring Whisperkit. "This isn't for you," she meowed eventually, voice monotone. "You're old enough to eat on your own anyways." Whisperkit's eyes watered a little.
So Beckycreek isn't going to share? Hazepaw felt a little shocked. Although he shouldn't, considering the queen usually gave her oldest litter the cold shoulder. He could hardly remember a time when she was genuinely comforting towards them. She was good at *mothering*, that much was certain; but she wasn't a very good mother. At least not to them. Turtlekit and Duckkit, however, were treated with the utmost love and care. It was strange. Hazepaw couldn't wrap his mind around why Beckycreek would show more favor for one litter over another. Maybe it had something to do with their fathers.

"Here sissy, share with me!" Squeaked Duckkit at Whisperkit, pushing her piece of prey closer to her older sister.
Whisperkit purred at the kit, perking up a little. But when she reached out to take her share, Beckycreek growled at her, pullling Duckkit back and snatching up her portion of the mouse.
Whisperkit's ears lowered, and although she looked sad, she didn't seem surprised by the queen's actions. A pang of smpathy squeezed Hazepaw's heart.

"Hey, why don't you come share something with me outside?" He offered, touching his tail-tip to her back. Whisperkit smiled at him a little and nodded. She followed behind as the fluffy white tom took his leave without saying another word to Beckycreek.
Over by the fresh-kill pile, Urchinpaw and Otterpaw were sharing tongues, with a half eaten seagull sitting in front of them. Whisperkit padded in their direction while Hazepaw fell behind apprehensivly.

"What about this fish?" Whisperkit suggested, turning to meet Hazepaw's gaze.

Hazepaw gave a shrug. "Doesn't matter to me. Food is food."

Whisperkit giggled in response. She grabbed the fish by its tail and dragged it from the fresh-kill pile. It was fairly large, it probably took two cats to fish it out judging by its size. Whisperkit was struggling to move it on her own. So Hazepaw padded over to help, carrying it with her about a fox-length away.

"Aww, look at that," Urchinpaw crooned mockingly from the sidelines. "Hazepaw's finally learning to play nice with others!"

"I never thought I'd see the day," chimed Otterpaw, lifting a paw to her muzzle. She was pretending to suppress a giggle. "I was sure hedgehogs would fly before he would be nice to *anyone* besides himself."

"Guess we'd better go and look for those hedgehogs then!"

Hazepaw growled in annoyance. He tried to keep his calm, really he did, but the obnoxious laughter of his denmates set him off. "Yknow what, that sounds like a great date idea for you two!" He sneered, forcing a malicious smile to curve the corners of his muzzle. "And while you're at it, you can talk about the names of your future kits together. I'm sure they'll be just as loud mouthed as stupid as you both."
Urchinpaw let out a snort, while Otterpaw gave him an indignat look.

"Hazepaw..." Whisperkit mewed in a warning but wary tone.

Hazepaw wanted nothing more than to continue making fun of the other apprentices. To make them pay for their attempt at bullying. But that wasn't what he'd originally planned to do. He was trying to cheer up Whisperkit; and it was clear she wasn't having as much fun with being a jerk as he was. So, when he heard her tone, he dropped the conversation, returning his attention to the little gray tabby.

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As the day grew older, dark foreboding clouds gathered in the sky. The once warm, inviting afternoon turned into a cold, windy evening. A few drops of rain began to trickle through the roof over Oceanclan's head. Warriors hurried back to camp as the weather grew violent just outside their sheltered home. It would be too dangerous to fish now, with the ocean's waves crashing in the storm. And the rain seemed to come down in sheets like ice over a river. It was hard for a cat to see past their own nose out there. Hazepaw fluffed up his pelt as he made his way to the apprentice's den. He squeezed his way past the two large boulders, and down the small slope to where his nest was placed. The clan's other apprentices were there as well, settling down for the evening. A rumble of vocal commotion echoed off the den's walls, as the young cats spoke of adventures and accomplishments earned in the day. Urchinpaw and Otterpaw were being particularly obnoxious. But they silenced themselves once Hazepaw came into the den. They shot him indignat glares; waiting for him to lay down before continuing their conversation. Their voices became hushed, and their eyes drifted on occasion back towards the fluffy white tom. It was obvious they were talking about him, from the giggles they made after each glance. Hazepaw huffed, tucking his face beneath his tail, trying to block the pair of annoying furballs out. He was relieved when sleep came to him. Only the sound of rain echoed in his mind as he drifted off into a dreamless slumber.

When he awoke the next morning, the loud thrum of the downpour remained overhead. A few claps of thunder sounded, nearly shaking the den Hazepaw laid in. With a hardy stretch, the white tom rose to his paws and pushed his way into the camp. Outside, the sand underpaw was soaked. The camp looked to have turned into a giant
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puddle overnight. The salt in the air made it obvious that the ocean had a part to play in it. It must have flooded while everyone was asleep. And the rhythmic push and pull of the tides sounded closer to home than ever before. If he were to venture out, Hazepaw bet he could spot the waves lapping at the edges of the Twoleg Settlement Bridge.

"Let all cats strong enough to brace the ocean's waves gather here beneath the Mighty Dune for a clan meeting," Wavestar called, his voice muffled beneath another rumble of thunder. Hazepaw practically had to wade to make his way to the meeting. By the time he reached the dune's base, his underbelly was heavy and soaked. But he stood tall, listening to what his leader had to say. "As we get further into the season of Newleaf, so too do we enter one of the hardest times of year for our clan. I can tell by the churning of the waves and the darkness overheard, that things will become more dangerous for Oceanclan. And so, I have decided that we will be moving to the Forest Patch, until the worst of the storms have blown over."

"When will we make the move?" Ripplesnout, one of the senior warriors asked.

"We must evacuate at once. Apprentices need to help the elders along the journey. All available and former queens will be carrying the clan's kits."

Oceanclan was moving? Hazepaw was shocked to say the least. He'd never heard of the clan retreating to the Forest Patch for more than a day or two to escape the storms. But from the sounds of it, Wavestar planned for the clan to stay in the woods until the end of the season. But that would be moons from now. And they were *Ocean*clan, for Silverpelt's sake! They weren't meant to live among the foliage and trees like most of the other clans did. How would the warriors fish, being so far away from the ocean? Would they be expected to eat land prey all the time now? Hazepaw didn't like the thought of that.

"Let's *go*, Hazepaw!" Samson, one of the older apprentices caterwauled, pulling Hazepaw out of his thoughts. "We can't be wasting time daydreaming while the weather's getting worse.

Sandybreeze wants you to walk with Tunafin on the journey."
Hazepaw resisted the urge to bristle. He didn't want to take orders from another apprentice; muchless a former kittypet. But Samson said the orders were from Sandybreeze. And if that were true, Hazepaw knew he'd be in trouble if he ignored them. So, with a huff, the fluffy white tom splashed his way over to the elder's den. All while wondering why his mentor couldn't come talk to him herself.
As he padded along, Hazepaw spotted Sandybreeze by the nursery. With one paw on the edge of the deceased car, she waited as Richfur passed along kits to be set aside and taken to the new camp. Hazepaw instantly understood why his mentor had to delegate instructions to others to pass along. She was doing her job as a deputy. Protecting the clan, while ensuring everything ran smoothly. Hazepaw hoped to have the same opportunity one day.
Wasting no more time, Hazepaw ducked his head beneath the overturned boat to find the elder, Tunafin. The old tom was still curled up in his nest, sound asleep. He hadn't heard Wavestar's announcement, likely dozing through the entire meeting.

"Ey, Tunafin!" Hazepaw called, only to be met with snores. "Tunafiiiin!"
The old silver tabby stirred with a cough, shooting an angry glare over his shoulder, before tucking himself back into his nest. Hazepaw growled in frustration. He moved under the den, grabbing the old cat by his scruff.
"Wavestar's ordered an evacuation. Let's go!"
Tunafin jolted, swinging around with unsheathed claws. He aimed for Hazepaw, striking him in the muzzle. The white tom dropped the elder at once with a yelp.

"What'stha big idea handlin' me like that, ya lil' barnacle?" Tunafin snapped with nostrils flared.

"You wouldn't get up!" Hazepaw argued backed.

"Ya couldn't 'ave one of ma denmates come an' wake me instead of ya rude self?"

"No! Sandybreeze told me I have to be your escort. It's too dangerous for an old gull like you to travel alone. Besides, the other

elders are being moved to the Forest Patch already. It's just you an' me now."

"Ya don' say?" Tunafin mused. He gave his pelt a shake, then stood as tall as he could. He gave another cough then drew himself toward Hazepaw. "Ya know ya could'a just said that earlier. A'right then, youngin'. Let's get a move on."
Finally, Hazepaw wanted to sigh with relief. Instead, he flanked Tunafin, helping the elder make his way out of the den and into the camp.
The remaining members of the clan were there, gathered by the edge of the clearing. They braced themselves for the journey across the territory, with fur fluffed. Then, bravely, they made their way into the storm. *Oh great, we're probably the last cats to leave*, Hazepaw griped in his mind, following the tail of Puddlefur as he nearly slipped from sight.

"Good gracious! Ah haven' seen a storm as narly as this since ah was a 'Paw!" Tunafin piped, an eye closed and ears flat as the rain assaulted him. Hazepaw, too, cringed in the face of the storm. The raindrops struck hard in the whipping wind, searing the skin beneath his thick pelt. His ears tingled from the stinging cold; sight blurry in the poor conditions. Sediment and rain slaptter created a fine mist all around them, making navigation difficult. Only the warmth of the elder by his side, and the silhouettes of his clanmates ahead, made Hazepaw push through.

"Has anybody seen Shellsplash?" Kinkfoot called, pausing to whip her head around and search the faces of her clanmates.

"Wasn't she with Puddlefur?" Caterwauled Clamleg in reply as he passed, head lowered.

"Yeah! She went on the hunting patrol!" Seaweedfang chimed in.

"I didn't see her come back," Puddlefur answered. "But she mentioned wanting to stay out later. Maybe she's still hunting?"

"In this weather? She's crazy!" Scoffed Kinkfoot with a disapproving pelt shake.

"It doesn't matter. We'll have to look for her later," Clamleg decided, with the other warriors grunting in agreement.
At Hazepaw's side, Tunafin began to pant. His body shook, tongue sticking out of his mouth. Despite the cold, the old tom appeared to be overheating. Or fatigued.

"You ok?" Hazepaw asked the elder.

Tunafin glanced at him the best he could, eyes dull. "A bit worn already. But ah'll make it," he answered back simply. But his movements were growing more sluggish by the heartbeat. Tunafin began coughing once again, the sound rattling in his ribcage. *I hope you're right*, Hazepaw held back the words, allowing the old tom to lean against him more.
Ahead, just past the edge of the beach, a barely visible wall appeared. It became clearer with each step taken, and the shape of trees grew more defined. They'd nearly made it to the Forest Patch. It was only a couple of tree-lenths away now.
The ground squished uncomfortably underpaw as Hazepaw took his first steps into the woods. But the rain suddenly felt ordinary as stood beneath the cover of leaves. And tree trunks blocked the worst of the wind, making the storm much more tolerable. The discomfort he felt upon arrival had become quashed by an overwhelming sense of relief. *No wonder why Treeclan loves the forest so much*. Maybe the next few moons wouldn't be so bad.

"We're almost to the camp!" Hazepaw heard a warrior announce along the winding path ahead.

"You hear that, Tunafin?" Hazepaw checked. But the elder shook his head. He stopped suddenly, sitting down in the mulch.

"Yeah. Jus'-Jus'...gimme a moment," he requested, his panting turned into labored breaths. Hazepaw paused beside him, watching Tunafin go from his seated position to a lay in a few heartbeats. His head lowered to his paws; propped in an awkward position. He was starting to smell strange; like sickness.

"Maybe I should go on ahead?" Hazepaw wondered aloud. "You need to be seen by a medicine cat. I can get one."
Tunafin shrugged, prompting Hazepaw to go through with his plan.

"Keep an eye on Tunafin for me," he asked Seaweedfang as he passed by with urgency in his step. "I need to get Curlear." Hazepaw wasted no time to listen for the warrior's response. He sprinted past a few other clanmates, searching for a healer.
At the entrance to the temporary camp, Bluesky and Sharktooth stood, taking a count of each cat who came through. They each greeted Hazepaw as he approached, a bit confused by his rush. "Tunafin needs assistance," Hazepaw told Bluesky, turning on his paws immediately to lead him to the elder. Bluesky and Sharktooth shared a glance before the blue-gray tom followed to see his new patient.
As the pair approached where Tunafin was settled, Seaweedfang padded over to meet them. A grim expression was set on her face, and Hazepaw could feel his heartbeat pounding. Bluesky nodded his head, following the warrior to the old tom's side. Tunafin was laying on his flank now, his mouth agape slightly. Yet no breath came in or out. His eyes were still open, glazed over with a telltale sign of his passing.

"Did he say anything?" Was all that the medicine cat asked.

"He said 'I'm so tired.'" Seaweedfang replied, voice low.
And that was it? Hazepaw thought, trying to stop his legs from trembling. This would be his first encounter with death. Hazepaw had never thought a cat would treat it so casually. Yet Bluesky and Seaweedfang seemed hardened to the sight of it. Perhaps it was because Tunafin's demise could be considered "peaceful", compared to many other cats. Perhaps the older cats were used to seeing corpses. But Hazepaw felt sick at the sight. Tunafin had been fine a short while ago. And now?

"Go ahead of us, Hazepaw. Give the news to Wavestar. Seaweedfang and I will bring Tunafin home." Bluesky rested his tail on the younger cats shoulders. It was clear the healer had taken notice of the young tom's discomfort. "Maybe speak to the queens, as well." Hazepaw almost felt relieved being sent ahead. It gave him some time to process what he had seen. As he entered into the temporary camp, he could hear Urchinpaw's voice calling to him. Yet it sounded so distant, even as the black tom approached him.

"What's gotten into you? You look like you've seen a ghost!"

Urchinpaw teased, tapping Hazepaw's shoulder with a paw. Hazepaw gave back a hollow glare, then kept moving. Urchinpaw seemed to pause at this, and Hazepaw could feel his heavy gaze baring into the back of his head.

"Hazepaw?" Wavestar questioned, as he noticed the look the young apprentice wore. He glanced over his shoulder, probably to Urchinpaw, then gave his attention back to the other tom as he approached.

"Tunafin died on the journey here. Bluesky and Seaweedfang are bringing him to camp," he stated, voice monotone. Hazepaw didn't know how to feel in that moment. But whatever emotion it was, it wasn't pleasant. He hadn't been close to Tunafin in the slightest. But he'd never wanted to see him dead either. He didn't want to see any cat dead.

Wavestar grunted. "I knew he was not long for this world. But...I didn't think it would happen this soon. Thank you for informing me." Hazepaw nodded numbly, turning around to settle himself somewhere relatively isolated and dry. He laid on his belly, setting his chin upon his paws. If he closed his eyes, he could see the blank stare of the elder; the light that had been present only moments before, gone. Hazepaw shivered. Then, he felt warmth against his side. Hazepaw nearly jumped out of his fur, settling as Otterpaw fixed him with an odd look.

"I overheard the news you shared with Wavestar," she explained. "I'm sorry you had to experience that. Its always hard to lose a clanmate. Even if you aren't close with them." Otterpaw sounded wise beyond her years. Hazepaw wondered what she had gone through in her time living with Grassclan.
By the camp's entrance, Hazepaw spotted Bluesky and Seaweedfang dragging Tunafin's body. They set the old tom in a dry spot in the clearing, then went back to their assigned duties. Only Wavestar came to sit beside the elder, along with Sharktooth. But the two kept a respectful dictance, only bowing their heads to honor the old warrior.

"Was Tunafin not well liked?" Otterpaw piped suddenly, her eyes trained on the body of the silver tabby.

"He was highly respected," was Hazepaw's response.

"Then why isn't anyone sitting vigil?" Questioned Otterpaw, her voice low.

"I don't think he has any living kin." Hazepaw shrugged, licking his shoulder fur.

"Is that how it works here? Only those related will mourn the loss of a dead cat?" Otterpaw scoffed, rising to her paws. "Oceanclan is so strange." With that, she padded over to where Tunafin laid. She bowed her head next to his, speaking something into the elder's ear that Hazepaw couldn't hear. She remained with Tunafin for a good few heartbeats. Then she gave the old silver tabby a respectful lick on the shoulder before returning to Hazepaw's side.
Hazepaw stared at her, perplexed. Why had she gone over to Tunafin like that? He wasn't anything to Otterpaw.

"He was our clanmate. He deserved to be wished well on his journey to Starclan," she answered his unspoken question. Hazepaw grunted, trying his hardest to seem understanding of her actions. But an awkward silence fell over the pair. In it, Hazepaw's thoughts began to drift towards darkness; of the future, of the fate of the cats around him. But before he could spiral too deep into despair, Otterpaw spoke once more;
"Yknow, at times like this, we should look on the bright side of things. That's what my foster father taught me. Tunafin lived a long life. And the clan is strong, thanks to his seasons of dedication. Life will go on, because he gave his."
Hazepaw hummed thoughtfully. He'd never considered things that way before. As he glanced around, deep in his contemplation, Hazepaw realized that Otterpaw was right.
Den Keepers were busy constructing shelters from surrounding shrubs and tree branches. Curlear sat beneath a lopsided birch sorting through whatever herbs he'd brought to the new camp. Currentkit and Stonekit were playing tag, getting under warriors' paws. Across the way, Bluesky was checking Sunnystream's belly, with Whisperkit watching attentively. The two mewed with delight as they discovered a litter of kits would soon join Oceanclan's ranks. Life indeed went on. And though a heaviness still sat in Hazepaw's chest, a blossom of hope grew in his heart. The future wasn't so

dim. And the odd feeling in his belly from yesterday finally dissolved.

Chapter 9

Sunlight trickled through the Newleaf thin branches of the trees overhead, right into Hazepaw's eyes. The moisture from the ground seeped into his fur as consciousness returned to him. And a sense of irritation settled into his belly once he greeted the world with his presence. After parting his jaws in a yawn, Hazepaw turned, beginning to groom the mud and leaf matter off his dense coat. Sleeping outside had never felt so uncomfortable. But with no dens to provide shelter, cats had to make due with what they had.
The clan would be working on building the camp today, no doubt. With the weather calming down, if only temporarily, there was a perfect opportunity to gather materials. Hazepaw hoped the dens would be constructed soon. He didn't know if he could handle sleeping in the forest again without one.

"Hazepaaaw!" Sandybreeze called from across the way. Hazepaw narrowed his eyes as he turned to meet his mentor's chipper smile. How was Sandybreeze so happy and energetic, after everything that occurred yesterday? Hazepaw took his time rising to his paws, padding lazily over to where his mentor waited.
"Glad to see you're awake," she commented, her good mood spoiled by his lack of enthusiasm. "You'll accompany Puddlefur, Dimpath, Seaweedfang, Samson, and Otterpaw on the collecting patrol." Sandybreeze pointed her muzzle towards the awaiting warriors, as if to show how serious she was. Hazepaw resisted the urge to groan, being shot a warning glare by the Oceanclan deputy before he could. Still, he parted his jaws, ready to argue. Then, Otterpaw came trotting over; prompting him to give up the argument before it'd even begun. The last thing he wanted to do was give Otterpaw ammunition to tease him with. Igoring orders would certainly garner the brown molly's commentary. Sandybreeze gave a smug smirk, turning to speak with another group of cats waiting behind her. Hazepaw lowered his head, stalking over to his patrol wordlessly.

"Hey!" Otterpaw called after him, rushing to catch up. But Hazepaw

kept moving, ignoring the annoying she-cat for as long as possible.

"Perfect, looks like we're all here," Seaweedfang pointed out as the younger apprentices came to stand at her side.

"Good. Let's not waste any time with chit-chat. We need to start collecting materials as soon as possible," Puddlefur meowed, leading the patrol into the forest with a jerk of his head. Hazepaw was relieved by the silence that had fallen over them, following his superiors into the undergrowth with apathy swirling in his mind. All he wanted to do was complete the mission and go back to camp. Then, perhaps, he could get some training from his mentor. Or some better sleep. Grunt work like den keeping and collecting were the last jobs Hazepaw held interest in. He wanted to use his claws, sink his teeth into something warm and fleshy. He wanted to hunt and fight, like a warrior. An assignment like this was dreadfully boring in compare.

"Where are we headed?" Otterpaw broke the silence, speaking to Samson with a hushed voice.

"To Rubble Path, I believe. Wavestar wants us to do some work there," the older tabby apprentice answered, his gaze trained on the path ahead.

"Work? But aren't we gathering stuff to build our new dens?"

"Well, yeah. But that's only half the mission. We're meant to mark the border, too. I'll explain a little more once we get there." Otterpaw let out a confused hum, but made no effort to pry more information from the older apprentice. Yet a curiosity sparkled in her yellow eyes that even got Hazepaw interested. As much as he was relieved by the returning silence, Hazepaw also found himself growing curious. What exactly did Samson mean by "work"? Was there more to the mission than collecting materials and leaving fresh scent marks? Anticipation began to build in Hazepaw's chest at the idea of a more eventful day ahead.
The squishy mud underpaw eventually shifted into soft cakey sand, welcoming the Oceanclan cats back onto the beach. Hazepaw cast his gaze in the direction of their original home, shocked to see the ruins of yesterday's storm. Debris littered the sand; branches, leaves,

and fragments of rock were scattered everywhere. There were even bits of Twoleg trash scattered about. The shore, which had once been smooth and sunbleached, was now soaked, with new craters and dunes sculpted in the oddest of places. A lot of cleanup would need to be done, once the stormy season had come to an end. For now, Hazepaw turned away from the land of his birth, following his clanmates towards the rocky cliffside bordering their neighbor's territory. The ground began to slope the closer they drew to Rubble Path, and soon the rocky terrain came into clear view. Puddlefur then turned, blocking the patrol's path.

"Alright, here's the plan," he mewed quietly, drawing his clanmates in to huddle around him. Hazepaw brought himself closer to Dimpath's side, listening attentively. The warmth of the she-cat's body did nothing to quell the excited tremble of Hazepaw's. "Otterpaw and Hazepaw will go on ahead. One of you will make your way up the Rubble Path to lay new scent markers, while the other hunts. Go up as far as you can. When a patrol comes, feign stupidity. Hopefully this coaxes Treeclan to chase you off. Then when they try, Seaweedfang, Samson, Dimpath, and I will jump out and attack."

"What's the point of this?" Otterpaw questioned.

"Wavestar thinks we'll need better hunting grounds while we're in the Forest Patch. So, we've been tasked to claim it," Dimpath responded.

"And what's the point of being so sneaky?"

"Oh, we aren't trying to be," Samson smirked. "We're just trying to have a little fun while doing it."

"Heck yeah!" Hazepaw cheered, rearing up on his hind legs giddily. Seaweedfang and Dimpath turned on him at once, hushing Hazepaw with harsh hisses.

"Anyways," Puddlefur continued, eyes rolling, "with the element of surprise on our side, we should be able to send those tree lickers running. Then we can reap the spoils, and gather prime building materials. Finally we can head home, with news of our new piece of

territory."

"Do you understand the mission?" Seaweedfang checked, looking at each apprentice in turn. She barely held the gaze of her own apprentice, Samon, giving more attention to the younger pair. Otterpaw looked nervous, but determination glittered in her yellow eyes as she nodded. Then Hazepaw smirked, agreeing to the plan without a heartbeat of hesitation.
Puddlefur shooed the apprentices off with a whisk of his tail, getting closer to the other cats to direct them into their own positions. Hazepaw hurried on ahead, leaving Otterpaw to pad unsurely behind. He didn't want to waste time deciding who would hunt and who would mark the border. Hazepaw already knew he was the perfect cat to push the boundaries of the territory.
As he stepped paw onto the stones which made up the Rubble Path, a clear image filtered into his mind. At the top of the slope he could see the pretty Treeclan molly, Moonpaw, smiling down at him. She beckoned to the white tom, inviting him to join her. Then reality set back in, returning Hazepaw to the present. It had only been a few days since he had met the silver Treeclan apprentice. Yet Hazepaw found himself so compelled to see her again. Maybe she would be on the patrol that Oceanclan was hoping to run into. Would she be happy to see he'd come all the way up the slope? Probably not; not under these circumstances at least. But still, the thought of Moonpaw being there excited him greatly. So, Hazepaw carefully picked his way up the hill until his paws touched the soft, dewy grass at the edge of the forest. The sound of birdsong in the distance filled his ears and called him forward, closer to Treeclan's woods.
As he went to take another step, the patter of crumbling rocks suddenly made him pause. Hazepaw looked in one direction, then another, parting his jaws to taste the air. There was certainly a Treeclan patrol nearby, but they hadn't made it to the end of the territory yet. So what was that sound? Hazepaw looked over his shoulder to see Otterpaw halfway up the slope, a small lizard dangling in her jaws.

"Ew, get rid of that thing," he told her with his nose wrinkling.

"No way," Otterpaw countered, putting the lizard at her paws. She bent her head down, taking a couple of bites out of it. "I haven't

eaten today. And I was told to hunt. Since that's not what we're actually here for, I'm having it as a snack!"

"You're disgusting," Hazepaw snarled. "You couldn't catch something normal that Treeclan would care about you eating?"

"It's still prey isn't it?" Otterpaw countered. "I'm doing my part for the mission, regardless of how palatable anyone might find it to be. But if it pleases you so much, I'll leave the rest for the crows." As if to prove a point, Otterpaw pushed the half eaten lizard away, burying it slightly beneath some pebbles. Then she turned in a new direction, sniffing for something tastier to catch. Hazepaw rolled his eyes, giving his attention back to the forest ahead. Apprehension made him hold a paw up to his chest, before he finally put it down into the better part of enemy territory. He approached one of the last few rocks on the top of the hill, spraying his scent on it. Then he moved forward, aiming to mark a nearby tree. As he stood only a fox-length away, a Treeclan warrior sprang down from the canopy. Then they rose to full height, glaring at the white apprentice. Hazepaw jumped back in surprised. He bristled, trying to make himself appear twice his size.

"Oceanclan!" Hissed the cat, prompting his patrolmates to join him on the ground below. Hazepaw examined each cat, disappointed that none of them were Moonpaw. But one cat looked similar to her, a gray and white warrior with long fur and angry pale green eyes. He stood tall, trying to intimidate the Oceanclan apprentice.

"Do you realize how far into Treeclan's territory you've come, 'Paw?" Asked the first cat, a brown spotted tom with a reddish-brown underbelly.

"Nope," Hazepaw deadpanned, making himself look bored.

"Go back to the beach where you belong," the gray and white warrior commanded, his tail swaying behind him.

"Or what?" Hazepaw challenged.

"Robinspots!" A ginger and white apprentice called. "There's another cat on the stones!"

The brown spotted warrior, Robinspots, turned to look in the direction of the younger tom. Hazepaw too, followed his gaze. Otterpaw was nearly at the top of the slope, her head held high. There was a mouse in her mouth now, a pretty sizable one at that.

"Prey stealer!" Yowled the only molly on Treeclan's patrol, a light brown warrior with darker color points.

"Your leader will be hearing about this," warned the gray and white tom with ears now flat against his head.

"Forget that," spat the molly, turning on the tom, "lets drive them away! They're only apprentices."

"Thrushmask's right, Wolfheart," Robinspots agreed.
Wolfheart grunted out a "fine", baring his teeth at Hazepaw.

Hazepaw immediately crouched, building up energy in his haunches before bounding away. "Run!" He caterwauled at Otterpaw, making her turn and flee. The Treeclan patrol pursued them down the Rubble Path, only a mouse-length away from reaching them.
As soon as the apprentices' paws hit the sand below, Puddlefur, Dimpath, Seaweedfang, and Samson sprang from their hiding spots. They pounced on the unsuspecting Treeclan warriors, clawing at their pelts with ferocity.

"Hold this," Otterpaw meowed, tossing Hazepaw her mouse. Hazepaw caught it just as the brown molly turned to join the frey, jumping on the ginger and white Treeclan apprentice. He let out a startled yowl, rolling onto his back without Otterpaw having to force him to. But the Treeclan apprentice was not submitting to her. He feigned defeat, then kicked up into Otterpaw as she came to land blows to his most delicate area.
Otterpaw was thrown back, her balance undone as she attempted to land on shaky paws. Then the Treeclan apprentice sprang up, throwing himself at the vulnerable she-cat. Hazepaw jolted, dropping the prey he'd been holding to go save his clanmate. He knocked the ginger and white apprentice away, hissing at him threateningly.

"Sunpaw, get back!" Shouted Thrushmask, rushing over to provide aid. But before she could reach him, Samson came barreling into her side, knocking the wind out of the enemy warrior. He clawed at her flank, causing her to cry out. But Thrushmask didn't allow a little pain to stop her. With all of her warrior strength, the burmese she-cat pushed Samon away with a shrug from her side, swinging a paw around to slap him in the muzzle. Samson yelped, backing away for a heartbeat to recuperate. Hazepaw came to fill the position the tabby tom had left open, swinging for Thrushmask's face. Thrushmask got back onto her paws, dodging each of Hazepaw's blows. She unsheathed her claws again, throwing a hit back at him. Blood sprinkled out from the cut she'd made along his chin, staining the white tom's fur. Hazepaw hissed throwing himself at her. The two cats tussled along the wet sandy floor, spraying sediment and torn out fur as they went. Thrushmask eventually pinned the fluffy white tom, her jaws around his throat and claws digging into his belly fur. At that moment, the memory of Tunafin's hollow eyes flashed in Hazepaw's mind, causing him to shrink in place. Would he really end up dead like that, during his first battle no less? Hazepaw allowed himself to go limp, submitting to the stronger Treeclan warrior before she could commit to ending his pitiful existence. Thrushmask eased up on his at once, kicking him away. Hazepaw skulked off on defeat, his body low to the sandy floor. His clanmates soon followed, each looking as defeated as he was.

"And don't come back!" One of Treeclan's warriors yowled after them, as the rest tilted their heads back to caterwaul their victory. Shame and humiliation burned beneath Hazepaw's pelt as he and the other Oceanclan cats retreated back to their temporary camp. Their mission was a failure. Hazepaw had lost his first fight. What would the clan think?

"You're back already?" Wavestar asked as the five cats entered the clearing the clan had settled in. He studied them all for a few heartbeats, grunting in disappointment. "I'll take it you lost the skirmish?"

"Yes, Wavestar..." Dimpath admitted with her head lowered. Bluesky and Curlear came padding over a few moments later,

healing herbs in their jaws. They each settled beside a cat, dabbing marigold and cobwebs along scratches and bites. Hazepaw winced as Curlear pressed some petals against his chin wound, the old wrinkled tom glaring to get him to stay still.

"How did the apprentices fair?" The gray tabby leader questioned further.

"They all fought bravely," Seaweedfang answered, head tilted as Bluesky draped cobwebs along her freshly torn ear.

"Samson, especially," Puddlefur chimed in. "He fought like a warrior today. I think he's earned the title, now."

"But...but I lost the fight!" Samson stuttered, surprised by his clanmate's words. Had today been his warrior assessment, Hazepaw wondered.

"Defeat does not define a warrior's skills," Wavestar explained. "Courage, strength, strategy, and determination are what makes a cat a warrior. I believe in Puddlefur's words. And as long as Seaweedfang agrees, I believe you are ready to become a full member of Oceanclan."

Tears welled at the corners of Samson's amber eyes. He raised a paw to each, wiping the wetness away. *Stupid kittypet*, Hazepaw thought. *How soft can you be, crying over such sappy words?*

"Oww!" Hazepaw whined as Curlear dabbed marigold on another of his pesky wounds.

"Thank you, Wavestar. For having such faith in me. I promise I'll be a warrior who'll make the clan proud!" Samson mewed, voice cracking a little pathetically.

Wavestar stepped forward, resting his tail on the brown tabby tom's shoulder. "You already are," he assured, beckoning him with a head tilt. "Come."
Oceanclan's leader moved to another part of the camp, Samson following in toe. Hazepaw went after them as well, wanting to have a good seat during the ceremony. Curlear tried calling after him,

but quickly gave up, instead giving his attention to Otterpaw. As Hazepaw settled into a spot, Wavestar called together a meeting, jumping onto the low hanging branch of a tree.

"Today is an important day for Oceanclan. Samson has completed his warrior training, met all the goals set for him, and has learned the warrior code," Wavestar began, temporarily giving his attention to Samson's mentor. "Seaweedfang, do you believe your apprentice is ready to become a warrior?"

"I do," Seaweedfang agreed. "He's worked harder than most apprentices his age. He's definitely earned it."
Hazepaw never realized that Samson had to try harder than other cats to become a warrior. But he supposed it made sense. Samson had been born a kittypet, much like his mother Bellapool. They'd come to join the clan about five moons ago, when Samson was just old enough to be named a 'Paw. The pair were still set in their soft way of life in the beginning. But Samson really wanted to be a warrior. Hazepaw supposed through rigorous training, the dark brown tabby had finally broken himself away from acting so pampered. He was a real Oceanclan cat now. He earned it.

"Samson, step forward," Wavestar commanded. Samson did as he was told, looking to his leader with pride in his eyes. Wavestar smiled down in turn, then tilted his muzzle towards the sky above. "I, Wavestar, leader of Oceanclan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. He has worked hard to learn the ways of your nobel code, and I commend him, to you, as a warrior in his turn. Samson, do you promise to uphold the warrior code; to protest and defend this clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do," Samson promised.

"Then by the power of Starclan, I give you your warrior name. Samson, from this day forward you shall be known as Samsontail. Starclan honors your balance and level-headedness, and we welcome you as a full warrior of Oceanclan."
Wavestar leaped down from his perch, approaching the dark brown tabby tom. He rested his chin upon the new warrior's head, earning a respectful lick on the shoulder in return.

"Samsontail! Samsontail! Samsontail!" Cheered the clan, silenced a few moments later by a swish of Wavestar's tail.

"Samsontail has chosen to become a Fighter and a Hunter. His duties shall begin the day after tomorrow. In the meantime, he will sit a silent vigil tonight and guard the camp while the rest of us sleep, to show that he is a true warrior of this clan," he concluded, allowing the clan to step forward and congratulate their newest warrior. Precious and Shimmerpaw gathered at Samsontail's sides, squealing about how they'd be the next to earn their names. Urchinpaw stood in front of the new warrior, receiving a reassuring rub on the head from the older tom's paw. The wiry tom's fur became even messier from it and he screeched, while Samsontail laughed at the younger cat's reaction.
All the while, Hazepaw watched on from the sidelines, uncomfortable with all the noise and happiness going on just a couple bear-lengths away. He barely noticed when Eelnose came to sit beside him, too distracted watching the going ons of his clanmates. His fur bristled ever so slightly as he waited to see what the ginger and white molly had come to bother him about.

"Hello, mother," he greeted dryly.

"Hello, my son," Eelnose purred in his ear. "Wasn't that meeting so inspiring?"

"I guess," Hazepaw shrugged, keeping his head pointed towards the crowd.

"It's nice to see that even the lowest among us are capable of such great things," she commented. "And what about you? Surely my son is living up to my legacy?"

"I fought my hardest during the skirmish, if that's what you're implying," he grunted, resisting the urge to let his ears fold.

"Did you?" Eelnose hummed. "That's not what I heard. Dimpath told me how you submitted yourself to that Treeclan warrior you were fighting against."

"So?" Hazepaw turned meet her gaze, nostrils flaring in anger. "She

had her teeth to my throat. What else would you expect me to do? Let myself die?"

"I expect you to try harder," Eelnose answered harshly. "Do you understand how *embarrassing* it is for me to find out my own flesh and blood lost his first real battle? At your age I was taking down warriors twice my size!"

"Well I'm not *you*!" Hazepaw countered with a hiss. He could feel his temper flaring within him, like an ember fanned by a rising gale. It was ready to blaze, and Hazepaw welcomed it, preparing to spit it out in a moment's notice.

Eelnose gave him an icy glare, an ugly scowl pulling down her lips. "No. You're not." She agreed.
In an instant, Hazepaw felt his fire be extinguished. The disappointment on Eelnose's face was undeniable. And although Hazepaw was angry at his mother for trying to compare the two of them, he couldn't help being overwhelmed with guilt. As much as he hated how Eelnose made the simplest things about herself, he still admired her greatly. Her opinions mattered to him. To know that he failed his mother made him feel as though he were failing him.

"I-" he hesitated. "I'll...I'll do better next time..." Hazepaw murmured, lowering his head. Eelnose rested her chin between his ears.

"See that you do," she whispered. "One of these day, I'd like to see that be you, earning your warrior name after fighting valiantly in battle. I want you to make me proud."

"Yes, mother..." Hazepaw agreed. "I'll do better," he reiterated.

"That's my boy," Eelnose purred, giving the white tom a lick before walking away to join the clan's celebration.
Hazepaw remained where he sat, isolated from the rest of his clanmates like he usually was. He felt better here, away from the crowd, while being riled up from speaking with his mother. He stewed in his thoughts, replaying the events from the past few days over and over again in his mind. Maybe he had been off his game,

after the shock of Tunafin's death. Maybe he had been allowing it to weigh him down. He'd just have to try harder to be less soft about that sort of thing. He couldn't let defeat and death bring him down. He had to keep on fighting, no matter what. Hazepaw swore to himself that in the next battle, he would not lose. Even if his clanmates would retreat, he would be victorious in his own personal fight. He had to be. That was the only way to earn his place in the clan. And then, someday, Hazepaw could feel comfortable enough to join them.

Chapter 10

Silver light shined through the canopy above, dappling the pelts of all the cats who traveled this night. The brilliant glow of the full moon made for an excellent guide in the darkness. And the buzz from all the warriors around her made Moonpaw's pelt tingle with excitement. She hurried along to keep up with her clanmates, eager to prove she could handle the long journey ahead. Tonight was her first time being invited to the Gathering. She was excited to meet all the different cats within the Land's Star. What interesting things could she learn from them, she wondered. How different was the folklore in the other clans? Did they believe in the stories of the ancient clans and the creation of cat? These were all questions Moonpaw was eager to ask, if she could make friends with anyone tonight.
Up ahead, the trees began to thin, making room for a thick wall of shrubbery. Blazestar led his patrol through the bushes without hesitance; guiding them into a massive clearing on the other side. Moonpaw gasped at the sight of it. Cats of all sizes and colors filled the space, mingling as one. It was hard to differentiate what clans they all belonged to from a distance. But most seemed to be having a good time, and that was a wonderful sight to behold.

"Go ahead and join the crowd," Blazestar invited, "remember not to let any cat corner you. Be friendly, but spare as little information as possible." After his speech, the firey tom took off into the crowd, headed towards his perch at Split Rock. Then Moonpaw's clanmates began to scatter about, leaving her as the only cat reminding by the bushes. Moonpaw bristled a little, looking left, then right, trying to figure out which direction she should head in first. She decided to go forward, and allow the crowd to manuver her wherever may be most convenient. On one side as she walked, Moonpaw observed a group of warriors regailing tales of battles past, passing the occasional joke between them. A little further ahead, five elders sat clustered together, complaining about anything and everything they could think of. Badgerface was with them, rolling his eyes at the stupidest of his peers' comments. Moonpaw chuckled, waving hello

with her tail as she passed. She heard a nearby queen mentioning their kits, another cat griping about a thorn they'd found in their nest, and a nearby apprentice talking about the latest battle move they'd learned.
As Moonpaw padded along, watching the interactions of all the other cats surrounding her, something threw her off her paws. She fell with yelp, head hitting the dusty floor underpaw. Moonpaw groaned as she sat up, rubbing a white paw against her now aching head. It took her an extra heartbeat to realize what had happened. Another cat lay a tail-length away, letting out a sneeze as they returned to an upright position. It would seem Moonpaw's wandering eyes had distracted her enough to cause an accident.

"Oh my Starclan, I'm so sorry!" She apologized, voice frantic as she jumped to her paws. She rushed over to the other cat, sniffing and checking them over. She'd feel terrible if her daydreaming had caused another cat to get injured. "Are you alright? Are you hurt? I'm such a mouse-brain, I wasn't paying attention to where I was walking, I'm so so sorry."
The other cat simply shook her head, giving Moonpaw a reassuring smile as she stood. She was a pretty cat, short and plump with white and black patched fur. Moonpaw noticed the little nub she had for a tail, and wondered where this cat had come from. As far as Moonpaw knew, only some members of Treeclan had small tails. Could this apprentice be from outside the Land's Star? A kittypet perhaps?

"It's ok, I'm ok," the stranger assured, "It wasn't your fault. I should have been the one watching where I was running. I was so busy trying to see if I was beating my friend in a race that I wasn't looking out for any cat that may be walking up ahead. What about you, are you ok? How's your head?"

"Oh good, I thought you might be injured." Moonpaw sighed with relief. "I think I'll be alright though. My head's a bit sore but I'll get some herbs from Mothsong when I get back to camp. My name is Moonpaw by the way, I'm from Treeclan."

The other she-cat's smile grew bigger. "I'm Swiftpaw, from Grassclan. Sorry for running into you. What a terrible way to meet huh?"

Moonpaw shook her head, raising her tail. "Not at all, it'll make for a great story to laugh about later on. Besides, there could always be some cosmic reason for why we've met this way."

Swiftpaw gave her head a thoughtful tilt. "Huh, maybe. So you said you're from Treeclan? Do you know Smokepaw and Magpiepaw?"

A feeling of elation lifted Moonpaw's heart at the mention of her brother and sister. It hurt that neither of them were invited to this moon's gathering, but at least now she'd have something fun to tell them when she got home tonight.
"Well I should hope so, they are my littermates after all. They're not here tonight, but I can tell them you said hi," Moonpaw replied, twitching her nose in amusement. Swiftpaw gasped adorably. She seemed to become lost in thought for a few heartbeats, her eyes trailing Moonpaw's features. Moonpaw guessed that the other molly was picking up on the similarities between herself and her kin.

"Hey, who's that?" Swiftpaw asked suddenly, nodding at a cat behind Moonpaw. Moonpaw turned to look at who she was referring to. Much to the Treeclan apprentice's excitement, it was her father.

"Oh, that's Wolfheart! Come on, come meet him," she insisted, taking Swiftpaw over to the tom. Moonpaw padded a fox-length away, standing in front of the fluffy warrior with a bright smile. "Hi papa-I mean-Wolfheart." She giggled. "Meet my new friend, her name is Swiftpaw."
Wolfheart turned his green gaze down onto Swiftpaw, studying her for a moment. Moonpaw noticed the other apprentice tense under her father's stare, and hoped she would not remain intimidated by him. Wolfheart seemed to notice as well and turned his attention onto Moonpaw.

"Hello my little one. And hello to you, Swiftpaw. It's a pleasure to meet you, I heard your name announced at last moon's gathering. How's your training going?" He asked, putting on his most friendly face.

Swiftpaw seemed to relax. "I think I'm doing pretty good. Chicorynose says I'm a natrual born hunter."

"Ah, so Chicorynose is your mentor?" He queried. Swiftpaw gave a firm nod, and Moonpaw suppressed a giggle. "That's good, I'm sure she'll make a fine warrior out of you yet. Now, I think you two should run along. There isn't much time until the gathering begins, and I'm sure you want to catch up with more of your friends. It was nice meeting you, Swiftpaw, take care." Wolfheart dipped his head to the white and black patched apprentice, turning to lick Moonpaw between the ears. Moonpaw trilled at him, bunting her head against her father's chin. Wolfheart smiled warmly at her before finally padding back into the crowd. Moonpaw watched after him briefly.

"Do you want to come with me over to Split Rock?" Swiftpaw asked. "I bet Frostpaw's over there looking for me, she probably thinks I ditched her."

"Oh sure," Moonpaw agreed, walking with her new friend over to the ancient cracked boulder. As they approached, a silver and white tabby rushed over, pouncing on Swiftpaw. Moonpaw moved out of the way just in time to escape being knocked to the ground with the pair.

"Swiftpaw, where have you been? I've been looking all over for you!" The apprentice yowled as she sat on top of the nubby tailed apprentice. "And who's she?" The silver and white tabby's attention suddenly fell onto Moonpaw.

"That's Moonpaw. I accidentally crashed into her during our race, and kinda got sidetracked," Swiftpaw explained before reasoning, "At least you got to spend time with you mom and sister."

The other she-cat rolled her eyes. "Yeah, well I was still worried about you. There's a lot of cats out here, it's easy to get lost or cornered by an overly curious enemy."
Swiftpaw mumbled another apology then glanced away.

"If anything, it was my fault that Swiftpaw was held up," Moonpaw interjected, "Im sorry for keeping your friend. By the way, you are the famous Frostpaw that I was told about, right?"

The other she-cat smiled, leaping gracefully off of Swiftpaw's flank. "'Famous?' Stars, I wouldn't go that far. But yep, that's me! I'm

Frostpaw! And where did you say you're from again?"

"Treeclan," Moonpaw purred with amusement. The other she-cat's bubbly attitude was infectious. She couldn't help but find it charming.

"Ooh." Frostpaw nodded, trying to look as though she remembered learning that information before, when she hadn't. Moonpaw found it adorable that she was trying to be so courteous. "Hey, is it true that your clan has lots of kits because once one cat has a litter, everybody wants one?"

Caught off guard by the question, Moonpaw broke out into a *mrrow* of laughter. She politely seated herself, wrapping her tail around her paws neatly. "Something like that. Although not *everyone* wants kits. We do value family, but its not like every cat in the clan needs kin or offspring. And what about Grassclan? Is it true that you're all neat freaks?"

"Nah." Frostpaw lifted a paw to clean as they talked. "We do like to keep things organized, especially Whitestar, but we aren't obsessed with cleanliness."

"I see," Moonpaw mused, letting out a thoughtful hum. She was interested in learning more about what the other clans were like. And while she was here, she figured she might as well get some information about Grassclan from Frostpaw. But before she had the chance to ask another question, a cat approached the pair.

"Greetings," the stranger purred, turning her ice blue eyes onto Moonpaw. Moonpaw stared back at her, confused by the adult cat's approach. It was a molly, with sleek silver lynx point fur, and a feathery looking tail. A few flowers were settled behind her ear; a set of holly leaves, a snapdragon, and a stem of lavender. She smelled bitter like herbs, with the slightest touch of wildflowers. Perhaps she was from Grassclan? Had the molly come to keep Frostpaw fron divulging any of her clan's secrets?
"Who might you be, little one?"

"Oh hello, my name is Moonpaw, I come from Treeclan." She smiled sweetly, trying not to let her confusion show.

"Moonpaw~" the older molly repeated the name, almost sighing it lovingly as she purred harder. "How lovely. I bet you are a well behaved apprentice, aren't you? Are you listening to your mentor? Do you pay attention to your lessons?"

Moonpaw nodded, forcing her fur to lay flat. Something about this molly's voice was making her pelt want to bristle. It sounded so familiar. But Moonpaw was certain she'd never met this cat before. An eerie sensation crept its way inside of her, like a grub burying into the bark of a tree. But Moonpaw didn't want to appear rude. So she kept up her polite facade, hoping the cat would go about her business soon and leave her alone to wonder.

"I work really really hard! Leafheart's the best mentor, I'm learning so much from her. I'm already thinking about becoming a Hunter or Den Keeper when I become a warrior," Moonpaw responded.

"Oh how nice! I'm sure you will be a warrior who'll make Treeclan proud," the she-cat commented raising her tail.
As Moonpaw parted her jaws to respond, a yowl sounded from the nearby crowd.

"Moonpaw!"
Moonpaw whipped her head around, spotting Wolfheart in the distance. He motioned for her to come to him, shooting the older she-cat beside her a glare. The stranger then turned, trotting over to where the medicine cats sat.

"I have to go, I'll see you later," Moonpaw quickly mewed to Swiftpaw and Frostpaw before padding off to join her father. Safe beside her kin, Moonpaw let out a sigh of relief. "Thank you, papa."

Wolfheart said nothing in response. He swept his tail over her, guiding his daughter through the crowd.
"I don't want you near that cat again," he eventually spoke once the pair were far enough away from their original position. He sounded stern, much moreso than Moonpaw had ever heard him.

Moonpaw looked up at her father, confused. "Why? Who is she? Is she bad..?"

"Her name is Snowfrost. She's not a bad cat but...she can't be trusted," Wolfheart answered, avoiding her gaze. "I'd prefer if you kept your distance from her."

Moonpaw didn't quite understand what Wolfheart meant. But he was a smart cat, if a bit overprotective. She knew he was only advising her for her own safety. And so, Moonpaw took his words to heart. She'd do her very best to avoid Snowfrost next time she was around, even if she didn't know the reason.
As Moonpaw and Wolfheart padded along, Skunkpaw trotted over trying to keep up with them.

"Hiya, Moon," he greeted with a purr.

"Hi Skunkpaw! How are you enjoying your first gathering?"

"It's alright I guess. I'm having a decent time. And I see you're having fun too. Say, who's that pretty cat you were talking to? The white and black one."

Moonpaw let out a small snort, glancing at her brother. "That's Swiftpaw. She's a Grassclan apprentice. And apparently a cat who's caught your eye, hm?"

Skunkpaw suddenly paused in their stride, choking back a noise of alarm. "S..shut up! Pretend y-you didn't hear anything!" He stammered, neck fur ruffling with embarrassment. Moonpaw giggled, turning to stand with him.

"Aw, don't be so embarrassed. I think it's really cute. And kind of surprising. I thought you only liked toms?"

Skunkpaw rolled their eyes, licking down their chest fur. "Gender doesn't matter to me. I know beauty when I see it."

"And clearly Swiftpaw is *"it"*?" Moonpaw teased with a smirk.

Skunkpaw lowered his ears slightly, pulling his lips back into a playful snarl. "I'm gonna kill you."

His reply only made Moonpaw's smirk grow into a mischievous grin. "Only if you can catch me!" she goaded, dashing off deeper

into the clearing. Skunkpaw called out behind her, and Moonpaw looked back to see them still standing beside Wolfheart. Wolfheart simply shook his head, a loving smile spread across his muzzle. He nudged Skunkpaw, urging his youngest kit to pursue their sister. From this distance, Moonpaw could hear Skunkpaw groan before he finally sprinted after her. Moonpaw picked up her pace instantly, weaving around warriors left and right, until she finally lost Skunkpaw in the crowd. After waiting a few moments for him to catch up, Moonpaw turned around and began retracing her steps back to him. As she walked, a cat bumped into her shoulder. *For Starclan's sake, not again!* Moonpaw resisted the urge to groan at the thought of knocking into yet another cat tonight.
But when she turned to apologize, Moonpaw was delighted to see the cat had nudged her on purpose. It was Hazepaw, the Oceanclan apprentice she had taught the Hunter's Crouch to before.

"Hey, remember me?" He meowed with a smile.

Moonpaw trilled. "Of course! It's good to see you again, Hazepaw. How are you?"

"Pretty good. I'm just bored is all," Hazepaw replied with a yawn.

"Bored? Really? Well, I could try to entertain you, if you want. I know a few good stories that'll keep your attention while we wait for the meeting to start."

"That sounds nice actually," Hazepaw admitted, flicking his tail. "Let's go sit over there?"

"Sure," Moonpaw agreed, following the tom closer to the shrubs that surrounded the gathering clearing. Here they could get a good view of the leaders on Split Rock while having a bit of space to spread out and relax. Almost at once, Hazepaw flopped onto his side, spreading out his back legs as if he were lounging in his own nest. Moonpaw had never seen a cat act so casually before. At least, no one except for Skunkpaw. But Moonpaw supposed the rumor of Oceanclan cats's laziness must hold some weight to it, if they were so content with relaxing this way around dozens of enemy warriors. Or maybe Hazepaw was a special case.
Before she could begin to start telling any of her stories, a caterwaul

sounded from across the clearing.

"Let the Gathering begin!" Moonpaw saw Wavestar yowl as he settled on his section of Split Rock. He waited as the warriors below fell quiet before he started his announcements. "The winds have picked back up along the shoreline; mid-Newleaf storms approach. My clan and I are taking shelter in our newly built Forest Patch camp as a precaution. We have lost too many cats in past Newleafs to rough waves and high tides. Shellsplash and Tunafin have already fallen victim to a recent storm. I believe this new temporary camp will help prevent further casualties."
A moment of silence was given for cats to reflect and give respect to the recently departed Oceanclan warriors. Moonpaw gave a glance to Hazepaw. He muzzle was pointed towards his leader, but she could see he wore an unpleasant expression on his face. His eyes were dark with despair, and Moonpaw wondered if he had been present when one of the mentioned cats had died.
"By Greenleaf we should be back at our usual camp under the Twoleg Settlement Bridge," Wavestar added. Another pause was taken after Blazestar gave a scoff. The fur along Wavestar's spine rose, and a glare was flashed at the Treeclan leader. But Wavestar made no comment, and instead continued; "In other news, my clan welcomes three new apprentices to our ranks, my kits: Whisperpaw, Currentpaw, and Stonepaw."
Moonpaw followed Hazepaw's gaze towards the three mentioned apprentices.

"They were just named this morning," he whispered in her ear. Moonpaw nodded in acknowledgement.
The larger pair seemed excited to receive the spotlight; a few cats around them giving welcoming chants and reassuring mews. Meanwhile the third cowered back, her eyes lowered to the ground. She looked like she wished a hole would appear to swallow her up.
Poor thing, Moonpaw thought sympathetically.
As the crowd settled back down, Wavestar stepped back to allow Blazestar to have his time to speak. A sinister smirk was set on the ginger leader's face as he snickered;

"You know it's funny how you mentioned moving into the Forest Patch, and yet you forgot mention that you and your clan have been

trying to take Rubble Path from Treeclan while staying there. And yet, you keep failing. How many skirmishes have there been in the past moon? About five or six now?"
Hazepaw bristled uncomfortably, sitting up to tensly focus on the leaders in front of him. Moonpaw observed him, with her tail swaying to-a-fro beside her. She'd known about the battles taking place at Rubble Path recently, but didn't realize there were so many. She hadn't been ordered onto any of the defending patrols, much to her relief. But it was concerning that two clans were fighting so frequently. If they weren't careful, a war could be declared. But in this moment, Blazestar didn't seem to care about what ire he might draw from the opposing leader, Wavestar.

"Until the storms pass and the winds die down, my clan is stuck in the Forest Patch. But your old leader, Ravenstar the Wise, did not think to give us more space for emergencies such as these. Of course we are trying to take Rubble Path, it's high ground, and serves well for hunting," Wavestar growled in response.

Blazestar snarled, his tail lashing as his temper flared stronger. "Yes, but that land rightfully belongs to Treeclan," he snapped. "Your territory begins where the sand line lingers. Not at the edge of the rocks by the top of the hill. Your cats merely want to use the rocks to bask upon anyhow, not to hunt like Treeclan frequently does. And another thing-" Blazestar suddenly turned his angry orange glare onto Whitestar, the leader of Grassclan. "It seems that more than one clan has been trying to push at our borders lately. Very recently I have had patrols coming back from the Grassclan border, telling me they've found scents of Grassclan cats past the scent markers, and have found remains of a few mice."
Moonpaw knew what he was talking about. She'd been on one or two of those particular patrols. The mice that were left behind were usually half eaten, abandoned for the crows to pick at. Treeclan cats didn't dare try to bury the remains, though. It was bad luck to chase crows from their food. But when cats could reach the mice, the clear scent of Grassclan was found on the prey.
Moonpaw watched Whitestar take a step forward on Split Rock, confusion in her pretty purplish-blue gaze.

"From what I know, none of our apprentices have stepped paw

passed the border," she responded. "And my warriors know better than to hunt beyond the meadow," Grassclan's leader was trying her best to settle Blazestar, her voice even and cool. But the ginger and white tom was unable to be swayed.

"There has been several reports of trespassing from your cats, Whitestar, too many for it to be an accident. One of your warriors has been stealing mice from Treeclan, and I advise you to investigate the situation and correct it, before I'm forced to remind you where the border lies. The same goes for you as well, Wavestar," Blazestar warned each leader, looking between them as his tail lashed harder. "Keep your claws out of our forest and off of Rubble Path before I reclaim the land Ravenstar the Wise so graciously granted you while you still lived under Pebblestar the Malevolent's rule."
Wavestar lowered his ears uncomfortably after hearing the name "Pebblestar". Hazepaw's tail thumped at the utterance of it, too. But Moonpaw had never heard of such a cat. Whoever they were, they must have been very impactful. Curiosity bloomed in Moonpaw chest at the thought of learning some history she never knew before. After the gathering, she was determined to question Hazepaw about it.

Suddenly, Brightstar of Marshclan stepped forward on Split Rock, drawing the attention of her peers and breaking the tension. "Heyyy, I don't mean to interrupt, but how's about we finish tonight's announcement so you guys can get back to fighting each other once it's over?" Anger was still written on the conflicting leaders' faces. But after a silent moment of thought, the three finally agreed to settle and finish the gathering without anymore incident. The rest of the announcements seemed boring in comparison, and Moonpaw found herself blocking them out until Fogstar of Mountainclan announced the conclusion of the gathering. Then she stood with a stretch, preparing to speak just a little more with Hazepaw before meeting up with her clanmates.

"Thanks for sitting with me," she mewed, "I'm a little sad, though. I didn't get to tell you any stories!"

"That's ok," Hazepaw assured, sitting up. "You can make it up to me."

"Oh?" Moonpaw prompted. "How?"

"Stay here with me after everyone leaves?" He requested, his yellow eyes glittering with hope. Moonpaw felt her pelt heat at the invitation. She hadn't known Hazepaw was interested in her enough to have her sneak around for him. But did Moonpaw have enough interest in return? She thought for a moment. She was certainly curious to learn more about the fluffy white tom. And if she stayed, she could ask him to tell the story of Pebblestar. As crazy of an idea that it was, Moonpaw found herself hardly hesitating to agree.

"Sure," she blurted out. "We just have to make sure neither of us gets caught."

"Of course," Hazepaw agreed. "Lets go meet with our clans. We can sneak away when they're not looking."

"O...ok!" Moonpaw responded, embarrassed by the fluttering sensation that started to form in her belly. "See you soon?" She double checked.

"Yeah," Hazepaw reassured. "See ya soon."

Chapter 11

When the Gathering ended, cats began to break away from the crowd of the Land's Star and rejoin their individual clans. Grassclan left the clearing in a single file line, looking tense but regal as ever. Oceanclan's cats skulked through the bushes, as if each had come to the meeting alone. Mountainclan cats gathered in small groups, joking and sharing news with one another as they disappeared from sight. And Brightstar counted each of her warriors as they went on ahead, ensuring every cat was accounted for before following them out.
Treeclan was the last clan to leave the Gathering Clearing. Blazestar waited by the front of his patrol, looking over the faces of his cats as they come to stand around him.

"Is everyone here?" He checked.
Moonpaw joined in with her clanmates' calls, assuring they were all ready and waiting to go home. But Moonpaw made sure to linger at the back of the group, eager to get away and meet with Hazepaw. As Treeclan made their exit, the silver and white molly slipped back into the bushes, watching as her clanmates disappeared into the forest without noticing her gone. Then she turned to hide herself somewhere close to the clearing. Moonpaw hesitated in a thick clump of shrubs just outside, her senses alert for signs of other cats nearby. The scents of all the clans lingered strongly in the air; it would be hard to determine if someone had followed her by scent alone. So, Moonpaw observed the now vacant hollow, waiting to see if Hazepaw would keep his word about meeting her.
A few more moments passed by, yet there was still no sign of the white tom. Moonpaw was just about ready to give up and leave. But as she turned tail, she caught the sounds of rustling in the undergrowth nearby

"Moonpaw?" A voice called, hushed, as if trying to be sneaky. Moonpaw perked up instantly, returning to the clearing in an instant with tail high.

"Hazepaw!" Moonpaw chirped back, trotting over to the fluffy white tom. Hazepaw beamed at her with a smile as sweet as honey. "I was starting to think you were a no-show!"

" 'Course I showed up. I'm the one who asked you to wait, after all. I was worried that you might have chickened out of the meeting," Hazepaw teased with a smirk. He flicked his tail, blinking at her slowly.

Moonpaw stepped forward in turn, bunting her forehead against his."Oh please, I'm not afraid of anything. Besides, I promised I'd be here. And I always keep to my word."

"I never doubted you for a moment," Hazepaw purred, keeping himself close to the silver and white she-cat. Moonpaw could feel the warmth of his breath from this distance, and it made her heart pound in her chest. She hoped that Hazepaw could not hear it. If he did, the white tom gave no signs of it.

"So...what did you want to do, now that we're here?" Moonpaw asked with a curious head tilt. Hazepaw hummed thoughtfully for a moment. Then, suddenly, he struck a paw against Moonpaw's shoulder.

"Tag," the white tom mewed, "you're it!" Then he flashed a playful grin as he dashed away. Moonpaw gasped dramatically at his proclamation. How dare he dub her as "it"!

"Ooh, I'm gonna get you, you silly furball!" She called after him, pushing back on her haunches to launch herself forward. Hazepaw laughed as he ran, avoiding Moonpaw at every turn. He zigged when she zagged, leaped away when he'd just gotten into reach. But Moonpaw kept close the entire time, just barely a mouse-length away from her prey. At one point, Hazepaw drew himself towards the edge of the clearing, turning just in time to avoid running into the bushes. Moonpaw used one of the trees to her advantage, leaping against its trunk before propelling herself off and right onto Hazepaw. Hazepaw yowled in surprise, rolling with her along the dusty floor.

"You're 'it' now!" Moonpaw laughed, playfully grabbing Hazepaw's

ear. Hazepaw moved, trying to push the silver and white molly off of him.

"Not fair! You cheated!" He insisted dramatically, though there was no malice in his mew. Moonpaw pushed back against Hazepaw, trying to keep him from escaping.

"I used the territory to my advantage," she countered. "All's fair in war."

Hazepaw shook his head. "I'm not talking about what you did with that tree move. I'm talking about how quickly you move. Treeclan cats don't run that fast!"

Moonpaw paused for a moment. She supposed Hazepaw was right. Most Treeclan cats didn't run the way she did. They couldn't manuver around things as gracefully on the ground as she seemed to be capable of doing. And most of her denmates were slower than she was; even the older apprentices. But Moonpaw had always seen that as an advantage, as a gift. Was it really so strange that even a cat outside of Treeclan could notice?
In her moment of contemplation, Hazepaw took the opportunity to get back at her. He lunged, throwing Moonpaw onto her back. Moonpaw squealed as she returned to her senses, kicking up playfully into Hazepaw's belly. Hazepaw feigned a growl, grabbing for Moonpaw's neck. Moonpaw pushed him away, rolling him over again, only to be bested a heartbeat later.
The pair of apprentices tussled around like this for a while, laughing and snapping smart remarks at one another until both of them had tired out. Then they laid down beside each other. Moonpaw smiled at Hazepaw. Hazepaw purred in response, his bright yellow eyes glowing warmly in a way that made Moonpaw's heart skip a beat. She wanted to comment about it. But for once, her words failed her. And so instead, she continued to stare.

"What are you thinking about?" Hazepaw asked. "You keep looking at me."

"I'm just glad to have you as a friend now, that's all, " she confessed

"Weren't we friends before?" Hazepaw prompted.

"We were acquaintances before. But now, I think its safe to say we're friends. Considering we snuck away from our clanmates to spend time together."

"I guess you're right," Hazepaw agreed.

"But you know, we haven't done all that much to get to know each other yet," Moonpaw pointed out. "I'd like to."

"Alright. What do you want to know?"

Moonpaw moved into a more upright position. "What's it like living in your clan? Do you like your mentor? How are your friends?"
Hazepaw gave another hum. He glanced away from Moonpaw, while he figured out how to respond. But he took a while. To the point where Moonpaw believed she'd overwhelmed him with her questions. So to inspire him, she decided to start and answer them for herself.
"Treeclan's really nice. We're all like one happy family. My mentor, Leafheart, is like a second mother to me. And every sunhigh, once all the hunting patrols have returned, we all gather in the clearing of camp and share tongues. Every cat spends time with one another, if only briefly. It's expected. But it doesn't feel like a chore. We all love to catch up with one another. I especially love to hear about all the fun things my denmates have learned in the day. Like Sunpaw! He's sooo funny. He's always bumping into someone or tripping over something. I love when he tells me about his day. My best friend, Tigerpaw, thinks he's needs to learn to pay more attention to his surroundings. But she's not trying to be mean. She's always so focused on her training in contrast. She wants to be the best warrior in Treeclan. She loves fighting especially."

"I can relate to that," Hazepaw remarked, although he looked unamused hearing anything about Tigerpaw. Moonpaw remembered the first time the two had met. The first thing they'd done was insult each other. Moonpaw supposed that left a sour taste in Hazepaw's mouth for Tigerpaw. She couldn't say she blamed him, though. She'd probably feel the same. But then again she didn't like holding grudges.
"Do you have any other friends besides those two?"

Moonpaw nodded eagerly. "There's also Blackpaw. He's our deputy's son. He's a sweet tom. The other day he brought his mom, Silverhawk, a bundle of dandelions. He said they reminded him of her because of her eyes. His sister Beepaw thinks he's so sappy. But then again, she's no better. She's always talking about toms and how she can't wait to be courted by one. She's got an eye on my brother Smokepaw in particular. But I keep telling her he's into toms. She should try mooning after a cat like Flamepaw or Leopardpaw instead. She'd have better luck there. But she's hoping Smokepaw will change his mind, "like I did". But I never changed my mind. I like both mollies and toms. I only changed a crush."

"Who'd you have a crush on?" Hazepaw seemed to perk up at the prospect of gossiping over her love life. But that made Moonpaw's fur heat with embarrassment. She lowered her head, swaying her tail.

"Tigerpaw..." she confessed. Hazepaw made a noise that sounded like a gag. Moonpaw scoffed, batting at him with a paw. "I don't feel that way anymore!" She insisted. Hazepaw gave her a look. "I'm serious! I realized the love I have for Tigerpaw is purely out of friendship. She's a great cat. But we're better off staying best friends. And what about you?"

"What *about* me?" Hazepaw echoed, grooming his chest fur.

"How do you feel about your friends?" She asked. Moonpaw realized she'd been doing most of the talking. Now she was ready for Hazepaw to take his turn. He appeared to have warmed up enough to talk about his life. But Hazepaw seemed hesitant. He paused in his grooming, tilting his muzzle towards the sky.

"My friends...are alright, I guess," he started, making sure to avoid Moonpaw's gaze.

"What's your closest friend's name?" Moonpaw asked.

"Believe it or not, it's Whisperpaw."

"Like that shy apprentice from the gathering earlier?"

Hazepaw nodded. "That's her, yeah. We've been friends since the nursery. She's always been meek. But she's probably the most tolerable cat in the clan. She's...nice, yknow?"
Moonpaw nodded in understanding.
"Then....there's Otterpaw. She's halfclan. But she's not the worst, I guess. She's understanding at the very least. But she teases a lot. Urchinpaw teases me more than she does though. But he's levelheaded. Even if he is a big jerk too often. My mentor, Sandybreeze, says he'll stop, eventually. But she thinks I need to lay off him a little. She says I'm too quick to pick a fight. It's not my fault if Urchinpaw always starts things!"

Moonpaw let out a purr. She moved close to Hazepaw as a chilly gust of wind ruffled through their fur. "They sound like an interesting bunch. I'd like to meet them someday. You'd like my denmate too, I think. Maybe you can meet some of them at the next Gathering."
Hazepaw's pelt seemed to fluff a bit as the silver she-cat leaned against him. But he didn't seem to mind. Perhaps he was cold and absorbing her warmth. Or maybe he was flustered. The thought made Moonpaw purr harder.

"Maybe. ...And I could try to introduce you to some of my denmates too," Hazepaw responded eventually, although he sounded reluctant. Moonpaw figured he was just nervous, with her so close to him; and the pair talking so casually despite being from different clans.

"I'd love that."
A hush fell over the apprentices. The only sounds which filled the silence were the wind whistling around them, and their purrs. But it was comfortable. Peaceful. Moonpaw thought she could stay like this forever, if it were possible. But then she'd miss all of her clanmates. But maybe it wouldn't be so bad. She liked Hazepaw. But she still wanted to know more about him.
"Yknow, you never answered my other questions," she reminded him eventually.

"Which ones?"

"About what your clan is like. And if you like your mentor," the

silver and white molly restated.

"Sandybreeze is strict, but a great mentor. And Oceanclan's great, too," was his response. Hazepaw gave a nonchalant shrug as he continued; "We're a strong clan. We can overcome anything thrown our way. We've already finished constructing our temporary camp. It only took three days."

"Oook, but what's the clan *like*? You're talking like a leader with a rival. But you can be honest with me. It's not like I'm going to judge." Moonpaw was sincere with her words. If the two of them were going to be friends, Hazepaw would have to stop being so formal with her. But perhaps that was only something she valued. She was normally pretty casual with all the cats she'd interact with. But Hazepaw was from outside of her clan. She knew she should probably interact with him more rigidly, more seriously. But at the end of the day, the two of them were the same. A pair of apprentices trying to make friends and find their place within society. Moonpaw didn't want to act like they were different; like they were enemies that needed to speak carefully. Especially not when they were being risky and sneaking off to see each other. And so, Hazepaw relented to her. He gave a small sigh, and finally spoke with honesty.

"Oceanclan is....tough. Cats aren't as friendly as they are in your clan. It's all kittypets and hardened warriors. Some of them are ignorant. Others can be too tough. Like half a moon ago, when the elder, Tunafin, died.... I was there. It was awful, seeing him like that. But Bluesky and Seaweedfang barely bat an eye. It's like they didn't even care. Nobody in the clan really mourned. But, that's how Oceanclan is. We respect our warriors. But I guess....we aren't as close as we could be."

"Do you think that has anything to do with that leader Blazestar mentioned earlier? Pebblestar?" Moonpaw had been curious to find out about Pebblestar all night. Although her method of asking about them was unorthodox. Still, Moonpaw figured this discussion was a good segue to lead into explaining the infamous leader.

Hazepaw bristled at name. His tail wagged with what Moonpaw could only assume was discomfort. Pebblestar had to be a bad cat, if

just the utterance of their name could cause such distress.
"It probably does," Hazepaw answered. "Pebblestar was a proud cat, and she loved fighting; a little too much, so I've heard. She used to cause so many disputes between the clans. She'd find any excuse to get offended, just so she could justify an attack on those who bothered her,"

Snorting, Moonpaw playfully interjected; "Sounds a little like you."

Rolling his eyes, Hazepaw continued; "Yeah. But I heard Pebblestar was worse. Late into her reign, she started making her own warriors fight to the death for her amusement. It got to the point where cats barely healed from their wounds before they were thrown back into battle again."
That explains why so many in Oceanclan have scars, Moonpaw realized. She'd only seen a pawful of warriors, but even at a glance it was easy to tell how badly maimed some Oceanclan cats were.
"From what my mother told me, Pebblestar didn't even let cats mourn their dead kin. So maybe that battle culture hardened some cats' hearts. Maybe everyone's still too numb to care, after everything that Pebblestar did. I don't know. But...it's the way we live now."

"It must make you sad," murmured Moonpaw, resting a paw over one of Hazepaw's. Hazepaw continued to avoid her gaze. But she could still see darkness clouding his eyes. His tail-tip swayed, betraying his true feelings. Still, Hazepaw kept up his tough persona.

"I mean, not really. Sometimes I feel like I don't belong, but...I know I'm an Oceanclan cat. I'd never consider living anywhere else but with them. I'll get tough too, with time."

"Not too tough to leave your cross-clan friends behind, I hope," Moonpaw mewed.

"Not you," Hazepaw was quick to say. "Even when I'm a rough an' tough warrior, I think I'll still like doing this kind of thing with you."

"You mean, talking? Being silly?" Moonpaw mused.

"Yeah," he agreed.

"Good."

Then, Hazepaw rolled onto his back, waving a paw to invite Moonpaw to do the same. Moonpaw let out a soft purr, rolling to expose her belly to Starclan above. Through the tree branches, she could see Silverpelt twinkling down at them; the full moon now barely cresting the trees on the western side of the clearing. The night was beautiful, and had proven to be a lot of fun. Moonpaw was glad she'd snuck away to be with Hazepaw.
More silence filled the air as the two apprentices basked in the comfort of one another's presence. Then, growing bored, Moonpaw rolled back onto her paws. With a stretch, she stood up and started walking away.

"Where are you going?" Hazepaw asked, rolling over. Moonpaw simply beckoned him with a swish of her tail, padding over to Split Rock. She marveled at the cracked boulder which towered over her for a heartbeat. Then she crouched and sprung onto the closest piece. Standing tall, Moonpaw waited for her friend to follow suit. Hazepaw walked over, leaping up to join her with enough grace to make any Treeclan cat proud. Moonpaw trilled with delight then sat down, tilting her muzzle towards the sky again. Hazepaw did the same, pressing his flank against hers.
"What are you thinking?" He wondered aloud.

"About our ancestors. About the sorts of things they got to see during their lifetimes. And what they've witnessed since joining the stars. I wonder what wonderful stories they'd have to tell."

"You really like stories, huh?"
Moonpaw nodded.
"I could probably share one with you, then, since you're so interested."

"Yes! Yes please! I'd love to hear what sorts of tales get passed around in Oceanclan," she mewed.

"Ok then. How about...the story of Sea Breeze?"
Moonpaw nodded more excitely, tucking herself further into

Hazepaw's side. She looked at him with intense, sparkling eyes, eager to hear what the tom would say. After clearing his throat, Hazepaw told his tale.
"Sea Breeze is said to have existed during the time of the clan's founding. She had a difficult life; trying to adjust to the new structure and stuff after having been part of a colony since birth. It was different, and Sea Breeze wasn't fond of change. She picked fights often as a result, and made all of the wrong decisions. She did it on purpose, allowing herself to get lost in her confusion and anger. She didn't care if she was a menace. All she wanted was to get attention. Until her life was cut short due to her recklessness. In the end, she got the attention of the wrong cat, and paid the price for it. In death, she realized she'd wasted her life, and now hopes to make amends for actions. It's said that Sea Breeze wanders the earth, and in dreams. She seeks to guide those who are lost in their own lives, so they don't end up the way she had."

"But why doesn't Sea Breeze accept that she made some mistakes and move on?" Moonpaw wondered.

"She can't," answered Hazepaw. "That's her unfinished business. She feels like she can't be forgiven for the way she behaved. So, she tries to make up for it by guiding others."

"I see," Moonpaw hummed, turning her attention back to the sky. The moon had completely disappeared from their line of sight by this point. And the stars were beginning to fade into the inky blackness above their heads. These were the first signs that dawn was approaching. Moonpaw realized that meant it was time to say farewell. And although she was having a good time, she wasn't willing to get in trouble for staying out too long.
"I think we'd better go," she meowed as she stood upon her paws.

"Yeah," Hazepaw agreed. "Our camps are in the same direction though. Maybe we could walk home together, before we say goodbye?"

Thinking about it for a moment made a smile grow on Moonpaw's face. "Sure," she agreed. "But first, you'll have to catch me!" She challenged as she sprang off of Split Rock and ran out of the clearing. She could hear Hazepaw call out after her, and she

laughed as she slowed just enough to let him barely keep up.

Chapter 12

Sunhigh came around all too soon. It was tradition for those on the gathering patrol to sleep until midday, in Oceanclan. But Hazepaw had been up all night. The amount of sleep he'd managed to get after meeting with Moonpaw was pitiful. But Hazepaw couldn't let himself fall behind on training because of it. Nor could he allow anyone to suspect that he had been out later than he should have been. Still, that didn't mean Hazepaw was going to act happy about being woken up.

"Rise and shine, 'Paws. Time for some battle practice!" Called one of the mentors from outside the apprentice's den. Hazepaw made a drawn out groan, sluggishly lifting himself from the warmth of his nest. His paws ached as he stood up, likely from the long journey to and from the Gathering clearing. Daylight stung his eyes as he emerged into the open, dimmed only by a gathering of clouds. The scent of rain hung in the air, alerting Hazepaw that the day would be as miserable as he felt.
Pausing long enough to clean his pelt of moss, Hazepaw managed to wake up enough to be a functioning member of Oceanclan. At Sandybreeze's call he padded along, following behind the other apprentices as they headed to the edge of the forest and beyond towards the training grounds. The shift from earth to sand underpaw felt uncomfortable, and Hazepaw realized he'd begun to grow used to living in the Forest Patch. Or perhaps the difference in the ground was more noticeable with aching paws.

"Stars, Hazepaw, you look exhausted," commented Otterpaw as she fell back to walk alongside him. Hazepaw only managed a grunt in response. "Did you have trouble sleeping?"

"You could say that," he mumbled, avoiding the halfclan molly's gaze.
"Me too," Otterpaw admitted with a sigh. "I was up and down all night because of some bad dreams."

Hazepaw's body tensed a little at Otterpaw's remark. If she had been

waking up a lot, did that mean she had noticed he wasn't in his nest last night? "That sucks," he replied, forcing his voice to stay even just as it had before.

"And what about you?" Otterpaw asked suddenly, her tone dropping almost to a whisper. "What were you up to?"

"Uh..." Hazepaw became even more ridged, his tail flicking from nerves.

"Relax, I won't tell anyone," Otterpaw promised. For once she sounded so sincere, and her expression showed she meant it, too.

Hazepaw sighed, deciding to trust Otterpaw. "I was out with a friend last night. We weren't doing anything wrong."

"Knowing you I bet you were getting up to all kinds of trouble," Otterpaw figured which made Hazepaw laugh a little.

"You think that's all I do? Get into trouble?"

"No, but you certainly *make* trouble, especially for others," Otterpaw snickered

"I've been on my best behavior though, I swear."
Otterpaw gave him a look with a brow arched in disbelief
"Ok, well. Mostly," he admitted. Otterpaw simply shook her head in response, although she didn't seem to be disapproving. She had a smile on her face and a glint of mischief in her yellow eyes.
Up ahead, Urchinpaw called back to her, asking if she'd come join him on the walk. But Otterpaw responded back, telling the wiry black tom to walk beside her instead. Hazepaw bristled, uncomfortable with having Urchinpaw hanging around. Otterpaw seemed to notice, then yowled;

"Nevermind, I'll come to you," before scampering on ahead.
Hazepaw sighed, relieved at being left alone, and spared of Urchinpaw's annoying presence. But he was also left with a thought. Was Otterpaw really going out of her way to be *nice* to him? It seemed strange. Ever since the death of Tunafin, Otterpaw had been treating Hazepaw differently. As if seeing him so vulnerable had

changed the brown she-cat's opinion on him. She still teased, but there wasn't as much bite to her words as there'd once been, when she was new to the clan. And now she was checking up on him, even being playful. Hazepaw could hardly believe what was happening. *Otterpaw's still halfclan though. She can't be trusted,* he reminded himself as he padded along. *She's probably just trying to play some mind games with me.* But was she really? Or was Hazepaw just so used to being messed with that it was hard to recognize Otterpaw's genuine kindness? He didn't know for sure. But there were more pressing matters to focus on, so Hazepaw pushed back his wonder to consider later.

As the patrol headed farther onto the beach, seagulls circled them from above. Their shrill squawking was warning, as if they thought the beach was now their territory to claim. They were trying to scare the clan cats away with their calls. *Dumb birds. It should be you who's scared. We'll make prey out of you all!* Hazepaw thought as he looked up at them. In the distance, beyond the screeching, he could hear the rhythmic crashing of the ocean's waves. How Hazepaw longed to see them again. The training grounds were close by the shore, but he'd yet to have a chance to train there. He was excited to finally be able to; and to get back to some semblance of normalcy, for Oceanclan standards. But the mentors had other plans.

"A'right. Everybody stop. We're gonna do some battle practice right here," Silverdrop meowed, using her tail to block the group's path.

"Wait, like, we're not gonna go to the training grounds?" Precious, one of the eldest apprentices, asked. Her voice was laced with a permanent attitude that Hazepaw had come to expect. The she-cat wasn't really snooty though, it was just her voice that made her seem that way.

"The area's swelled up with water from the storms and high tide," responded Ripplesnout, one of the mentors. "It's too dangerous to go there. And this place is as good as any to practice what we're testing for today."

"What *are* you testing us for?" Urchinpaw piped as he sat on the silty ground.

Sandybreeze was the one to answer; "Today you'll all be assessed on your progress with battle training. That way we can see what each of your strengths are, and what you require more practice with."

"You will be sorted into pairs. Then, you will all fight at once, in order to simulate a real battle," chimed Driftbreeze, the mentor of the newly named Currentpaw. "Stonepaw, Currentpaw, and Whisperpaw, you three will have to sit on the sidelines and observe the action for today. Try and learn as much as you can from your peers in the meantime."

"No fair!" Currentpaw griped, his sister, Stonepaw, caterwauling in agreement.

"Yeah! How come the older apprentices get to fight?"

"Because we haven't learned how yet," Whisperpaw murmured.

"Yes w-" Stonepaw was interrupted by a jab to her flank from Currentpaw, who hissed under his breath for her to be quiet. Hazepaw arched a suspicious brow. Were they trying to hide something, he wondered. Instead of dwelling longer, he decided to chalk their behavior up to their eagerness. Perhaps the pair had been preparing to learn how to fight on their own, and Stonepaw wanted to show off. But Currentpaw was usually the sort to want to prove himself. So why would he silence his littermate for wanting to do the same? It was odd.
Ignoring the young cats' protests, Driftbreeze herded the three newest apprentices somewhere out of the way. Then Hazepaw stepped forward, awaiting his opponent assignment. He decided he could question the antics of the littermates some other time.

"Precious, you'll be fighting against both Urchinpaw and Shimmerpaw. And Otterpaw, you get to face off against Hazepaw," Otterpaw's mentor, Kinkfoot, instructed.

So Otterpaw's gonna try and fight me? This'll be interesting. Hazepaw suppressed a smug smirk as he turned to face the mentioned brown she-cat. There was no way he was going to lose to that halfclan rat. Meanwhile, the marble she-cat, Precious, looked nervously between her two opponents. *Can't say I blame her*, Hazepaw

thought. But he knew Precious was being challenged more because of her upcoming warrior's assessment. Her mentor was probably using today's practice to determine if Precious was ready for her promotion. Hazepaw was only slightly envious to not be one of her training partners. He wanted to prove he could hold his own, even against a wiser foe. But he also knew that fighting one on one with Otterpaw would help him prove himself more. Taking down an enemy without the aid of a clanmate was no easy task. But it was seen as a great accomplishment. And right now, Hazepaw could use the boost of confidence winning solo would bring. Especially with how tired he was, and after being on the losing side of a few border skirmishes. Besides, at least Otterpaw could be seen as an honorable opponent, having full clan blood. Meanwhile Precious had been born and raised a kittypet, corrupted by softness. She would probably use dirty tricks to win her battles. Hazepaw wasn't in the mood to deal with something like that today.
The other apprentices around him began to size up their opponents, and Hazepaw realized he needed to start doing the same. Otterpaw was poised and ready to pounce the heartbeat she was given the chance. Hazepaw lowered his head, flexing his muscles, ready to take her on. She was smaller than he was in every way. She'd be an easy enemy to take down.

"A'right 'Paws," Silverdrop meowed, "begin!"
At once, Hazepaw barreled towards Otterpaw, striking out at her with a powerful paw. Otterpaw lunged to meet him, easily avoiding the blow as she came within range. Then she swung around, attempting to throw a hit of her own. Hazepaw intercepted, grabbing the brown molly by her forepaw and pulling her closer, snapping his jaws to grip anywhere he could latch onto. He managed to bite Otterpaw on the shoulder, met with harsh slaps to the face as he held on.

"Ow, Hazepaw!" Otterpaw yelped. "This isn't a real fight, get your teeth out of me!" *Oh right,* Hazepaw realized he was being too rough. This was only a test. He didn't want to get in trouble for taking things too seriously. Not today, at least. So, the white tom relented, allowing Otterpaw to break free from his grasp.
The brown she-cat growled as she backed up, her tail lashing wildly. She yowled as she lunged towards Hazepaw again, ducking

beneath him. *What!?* From his backside, Otterpaw turned like a snake to grip Hazepaw's haunches, pulling him down to the ground. Then she threw herself onto his back, swiping at his flanks with claws sheathed. If that had been a real attack, Hazepaw could be seriously injured, he realized. To counter her, the white tom shook his body, trying with all his might to fling her away. Otterpaw eventually lost her grip, sliding as she was thrown, and spraying sand everywhere. Hazepaw shook his pelt from the debris, preparing to attack Otterpaw again. But before he could, Shimmerpaw came pelting past, Precious right on her heels. The black smoke molly was avoiding the surprisingly fast kittypet's blows, her eyes wide with fear. A bit of blood trickled from above one of her eyes, and Hazepaw wondered if Precious accidently used her claws against her. None of the warriors said anything about it, though.
Just then, Urchinpaw shoved past, intercepting Precious in her chase and knocking her to the ground. The pair of apprentices tussled on the beach, feigning hisses and swipes as they fought. They were getting in Hazepaw's way, preventing him from reaching Otterpaw.

"Watch where you're going!" He snapped, but was left ignored. When Hazepaw's attention returned to where Otterpaw once stood, he noticed she was no longer there. Instead she'd come around while he was distracted, then jumped on him, pushing Hazepaw onto to the ground once again. She forced him to roll onto his back, pummeling his delicate underbelly, tearing away at his long fur. Even with her claws sheathed she was doing damage. Hazepaw was sure his belly would be bruised after this. As quickly and roughly as possible, Hazepaw got his back paws underneath the brown molly. He pushed up into her, easily throwing her off himself once more. Huffing to catch his breath, the white tom rolled onto his belly and crouched. Just in time to watch Otterpaw fall on top of Shimmerpaw. Precious took advantage of this, shoving the brown molly aside to take hold of her enemy. Shimmerpaw shrieked, summoning Urchinpaw to her rescue. But he too was caught in the former kittypet's grasp, brought to the ground and forced to submit to her power. Hazepaw chuckled, realizing he'd underestimated the marbled she-cat.
Beside her, Otterpaw shook out her pelt, locking her eyes back on

Hazepaw. She bared her teeth in a snarl, challenging him to come fight once more. Hazepaw took the invitation without hesitance, rising to his paws. He gave his haunches a calculating wiggle before going after his opponent once again. This time, Otterpaw rose onto her back paws to catch him, griping Hazepaw by the shoulders as she came back down. Her teeth snapped as she tried biting his neck and face. Hazepaw narrowly avoided her bites, backing up to break from her grip. But Otterpaw was surprisingly strong, holding him in place. With greater might the white tom managed to pull himself from the halfclan molly's paws. But his paw slipped as he moved, causing it to turn in an awkward angle along the shifty ground. Pain shot from his wrist up his forepaw, causing Hazepaw to yelp. Otterpaw took notice of the new weakness within him and used it to her advantage. She struck out, pulling the white tom's injured paw out from under him, making him fall with an audible thud. Then she got on top of him again. This time she gripped his scruff, holding him with a paw and forcing the white tom into surrender. Hazepaw allowed himself to go limp beneath her. He couldn't fight anymore with the pain he was in. He knew when he was bested. Even if it hurt more to admit that.
Triumphantly, Otterpaw tilted her head back and caterwauled her victory. The mentors around them began to praise her in response. They congratulated Precious, too, on her win against her pair of opponents. Both she-cats looked so proud and smug. They quickly abandoned their faux enemies to speak with their mentors, leaving the remaining three cats to recooperate.

"Hazepaw, you alright?" Urchinpaw padded towards him, checking the white tom over. "You took a hard fall."

"Why does it matter to you?" Hazepaw growled, pelt burning with humiliation. The last thing he needed right now was to be picked on by Urchinpaw. It was bad enough he'd lost his fight against Otterpaw of all cats.

"Is it a crime to check up on my clanmate?" Urchinpaw snapped back, his voice filled more with concern than anger. "Y'know, just because we don't get along well, doesn't mean I don't care."

"You've never acted like you cared before," Hazepaw pointed out, thrashing his tail. He was in no mood for Urchinpaw's anticts. But

the wiry black tom wouldn't let up.

"Well, you never let me!" he defended, his voice raising. But before Urchinpaw could catch the attention of their other clanmates, he softened his tone. "I've always tried to be friendly with you, Hazepaw. But whenever I try to joke around, you escalate things and turn it into a problem."

"I do not!" Hazepaw countered.

"You take every joke too seriously! You think every little teasing word I say is a threat, and act on that assumption."

Hazepaw hesitated for a heartbeat, repeating the other tom's words in his mind. He thought back to all the disagreements and fights the pair had gotten in over the moons. Then, he began to realize the problems he'd always griped about had been escalated by his own actions. Hazepaw's pelt burned warmer as he came to understand Urchinpaw's side of the argument. "...Guess I hadn't noticed before," he admitted.

"Yeah, clearly," Urchinpaw snorted. "Look Hazepaw. I'm sick of all this bad blood between us. Can we let bygones be bygones already, and start trying to act like clanmates?"

"...Fine," Hazepaw agreed, although it almost pained him to do so. Maybe he hadn't given Urchinpaw a fair chance. Maybe he'd let his biases blind him from seeing the other tom's genuine interest in becoming friends. It almost embarrassed Hazepaw to think that he hadn't noticed before. Hazepaw's thoughts then rounded back to Otterpaw. She'd been the same as Urchinpaw, seeking his alliance. He considered things for another heartbeat. Perhaps it wouldn't be the worst to act civil. For the three of them become friends. He'd told Moonpaw that they were. But that had been a lie. A painful one, Hazepaw realized. He didn't have any genuine friends in the clan besides Whisperpaw. Though reluctant, Hazepaw decided he could let himself become closer with Urchinpaw and Otterpaw.

"C'mere," Urchinpaw summoned, offering his shoulder for Hazepaw to lean on. Hazepaw rose to his paws, trusting the wiry black tom to support his weight. It felt strange to be so close to him physically.

But Hazepaw decided it wasn't so bad. Urchinpaw smiled at him softly, relief glittering in his eyes. Maybe their quarrel was something the tom had been grappling with in his mind for a long time. Now, he wouldn't have to worry about Hazepaw's reactions as much anymore. Hazepaw swore to himself he'd at least try not to overreact if and when Urchinpaw decided to tease him again.
Together, the pair made their way over to the rest of their clanmates, Shimmerpaw following at their heels. She soon pulled ahead of them to stand beside Ripplesnout, who helped to clean her injured forehead. The dark tabby tom purred at her, assuring she did her best in the fight. Beside her, Precious was being praised by her mentor, Bellapool. She boasted about her skilled fighting and promised that she'd hold the marbled siamese molly's assessment soon, after speaking with Wavestar. Hazepaw's own mentor Sandybreeze approached, agreeing with her fellow warrior. Then she made her way over to the two defeated toms. Otterpaw came around to stand at her side. She rubbed against her aunt, then beamed at her denmates.

"You two fought awesomely," she commented. "Nice use of teamwork, Urchinpaw!"

"Learned it from you," he complimented back. "Never thought a teamup would be the best approach to fighting. It sucks that Shimmerpaw and I lost, though.'

"You'll do better next time," assured Otterpaw before giving her attention to Hazepaw. "And Hazepaw, you're so strong! There were a few instances where I thought I'd be crowfood. You're really good at battling."
The heat that had crept through Hazepaw's fur before turned from a singe of embarrassment into a warm glow of pride.

"There's still a lot of improvement that needs to be done," Sandybreeze interjected. "But yes, you did well, Hazepaw. Work on strategizing more, and you'll be on your way to becoming powerful warrior."
Part of him wanted to thank his mentor for the compliment. But a voice in the back of his mind prevented Hazepaw from speaking up. It almost sounded like his mother, telling him not to thank others for skills he personally possessed. Instead, Hazepaw gave a grunt

and held his head high. Sandybreeze chuckled, flicking her tail to prompt him and the other apprentices to follow her.
"That's enough practice for today. A couple of you got too rowdy, so we need to get you patched up before we do anymore training. We'll come back and work on your flaws tomorrow," announced the deputy, sweeping her gaze over each young cat.

"A'right youngins, that means we're goin' home," Kinkfoot ordered, taking lead of the patrol.

"No fair, no fair!" Stonepaw whined, stomping her paws. "We didn't get to do *anything*!!"

"Quiet yourself," Sandybreeze hissed before turning her attention to Scallopfall, Luckysong, and Driftbreeze. "Get to teaching your apprentices the basics. That way they can join us for tomorrow's lessons. We'll meet you back at camp later. But be sure to return before the weather sours. We can't afford to lose any more cats to the storms."

"Alriiight!" Currentpaw cheered. Stonepaw laughed triumphantly, leaping onto her brother to start a playful brawl. The littermates tussled along the beach with glee, still behaving like kits. Meanwhile Whisperpaw kept her composure, highlighting how a proper apprentice should behave.

"They're still fluffy behind the ears, they'll learn to take things more seriously with time," Urchinpaw mewed in Hazepaw's ear. He could barely supress the purr that began to rumble in his thought. Hazepaw chuckled.

"The rest of you, come along," Kinkfoot summoned once more, this time allowing Sandybreeze to take the lead. Hazepaw followed his clanmates as they walked back to their temporary camp, with Urchinpaw and Otterpaw right at his side.

Chapter 13

A grumbling startled Moonpaw from her nap close to sunhigh. It sounded as if someone were talking, as softly as a dove's coo. But with how sleepy she was, Moonpaw could barely distinguish if the noise made up any coherent words. And it barely managed to coax the silver and white she-cat completely from her doze, anyhow. Whatever was going on couldn't be that important. So she allowed herself to drift, ready to return to the land of dreams. Then a series of whimpers rang out in the den, disturbing Moonpaw once again. Frustrated a little, she groaned, tucking herself tighter into her nest. She wasn't ready to get up yet. But the sound only kept growing louder. Until, suddenly, a cat caterwauled;

"*No*!"

Moonpaw immediately jumped to her paws, pelt bushing with alarm. Instinctively her claws slid out, ready to face whatever had come into the den. Her heart was racing as she glanced around the tree hollow for the unknown enemy. But there was nothing. The only other living thing that seemed to occupy the space was Moonpaw's lazy brother.
At the back of the den, Skunkpaw was hunched over in his nest. Their pelt was fluffed, and their sides heaved as if they'd just run from Grassclan's meadow and back. Moonpaw stared at her brother for a heartbeat. Had he been the cat who shouted? Cautiously, she moved closer to the oddly colored black and white tom.

"Skunkpaw..?" Moonpaw called softly.

Skunkpaw jolted, whipping around to look at his sister with watery eyes. "M...Moonpaw!" He sniffled. Immediately Moonpaw came to curl her body around his.
Skunkpaw began to sob, burying his muzzle into her neck ruff. He snuggled deeply into her, his body quaking like a leaf in the breeze. Moonpaw shushed him quietly, nuzzling the top of her littermate's head. She placed her paws onto his flanks, kneading his fur comfortingly.

"What's wrong, Stinky? What happened?" She asked when the tom had begun to settle.

"I-I..." they started, taking a sharp inhale. "I thought you were gone...!"

Moonpaw tilted her head a little. "Gone?" She echoed. "What do you mean? Why would I be gone?"

"A…a beast was attacking the camp!" Skunkpaw explained shakily, "S-so many cats were dead.... Then you came out of hiding and...and led it away. When the warriors went to find you, they only returned with the body of the beast.... You were gone."

"Ooh," Moonpaw mewed in realization, "you had a nightmare." She nuzzled her littermate some more, and began purring soothingly. "It's alright, Skunkpaw. I'm here. Nothing's happened. The clan is fine, too."

"But it felt so real..." Skunkpaw breathed, pulling back to look at his sister. His dull blue eyes were as wide as the full moon. The light from the outside world was reflecting in his startled gaze, making it look more haunted. "I could smell the blood. Hear the shrieks of the clan. I saw the beast; its horrible teeth and piercing golden eyes...."

"You were remembering the fox attack," Moonpaw figured. The way Skunkpaw was describing his dream sounded a lot like what happened in the nursery a few moons ago. All the way down to the color of the creature's eyes. They haunted Moonpaw, too. She couldn't blame her brother for still being shaken up. For still being plagued by the events of that terrible night.

"This was different!" Skunkpaw insistent with a rough head shake. "It was worse... At least half the clan was dead or missing because of the beast! I...I had a weird dream like this before the fox attack too... I didn't believe my dream, then. I thought...I thought it was a nightmare. But then it really happened...."

"Shhh," Moonpaw hushed, licking their cheek. "I think you should talk with the queens. You can't keep your trauma cooped inside you like this. It's eating you up."

"This isn't from trauma," Skunkpaw growled. It seemed he was becoming agitated. But Moonpaw was trying her best to keep him calm. "Whenever I have a realistic dream, whatever I see...it comes true."

Skeptical, the silver and white she-cat responded; "I'm sorry. But...there isn't any way that's possible."

"The other night I dreamed I had a large bird in my mouth. Then yesterday, I managed to catch a crow," Skunkpaw started, determination in his mew. It was obvious he was trying to convince Moonpaw of his supposed strange ability. "And a quarter moon ago, I was dreaming about Blackpaw, with his chin fur replaced by fluffy yellow flowers. A quarter moon later he came home with a huge bundle of dandelions; so many that they drooped out of his mouth and covered his lower muzzle like a curtain."

"Those all sound like coincidences," Moonpaw responded.

"Not when they all keep coming true!" Skunkpaw snapped. Then he sighed, pulling away from his sister completely. "Nevermind. I'm...I'm going to go speak with Silverhawk."

"That's a good idea," Moonpaw agreed, rising from the nest. She offered to walk with him to the nursery. But Skunkpaw insisted on going alone, unable to look her in the eye anymore.
Moonpaw's heart ached. She didn't want to see her brother so upset. Especially when he'd dreamed she disappeared somehow. She wished she could follow him; she so badly wanted to reassure Skunkpaw more. But she also wanted to respect her brother's wishes. So, she watched as he squeezed out of the entrance of the apprentice's tree; disappearing as he climbed below the branches outside. After a heartbeat, Moonpaw slipped out of the den as well. She could barely make out Skunkpaw's tail-tip as it vanished into the nursery across camp.
Moonpaw stood tall on the branch outside her resting place, watching where Skunkpaw had gone with longing. Leafheart soon padded by, looking to the nursery before turning her attention up to Moonpaw. She signed at her in the Silent Language, asking what was wrong. Moonpaw simply shook her head, avoiding her mentor's gaze. She didn't want to speak with Leafheart right now, not after

disappointing her earlier.

"Duck, Moonpaw!" Leafheart instructed as she swiped a front paw blow directly at the apprentice's face. Moonpaw shrieked, barely evading the hit. In a real battle, an attack like that could be incapacitating. Come on Moonpaw, focus, she'd mentally scolded herself, taking a few steps back before dropping into a crouch. Her head was throbbing slightly. She could feel her eyes drooping as she forced herself to think. But it was difficult. She'd barely gotten any sleep, after being out with Hazepaw all night. Leafheart had come to wake her shortly after dawn. Which left Moonpaw feeling exhausted. It was bad enough she already considered herself a lousy fighter. Now, she'd be even worse. But Moonpaw was determined to keep trying.
After a heartbeat, she lunged towards Leafheart's belly, aiming to knock the older molly onto her back. But Leafheart was an experienced warrior, and a move so obvious wouldn't be enough to take her down. Leafheart maneuvered away from Moonpaw easily, turning like a snake to kick out her back leg in retaliation. Moonpaw felt her paws slip out from under her just as she landed onto the dusty ground beneath with a thud. Leafheart was on her in an instant, forcing the younger she-cat to lay belly up. She feigned a clawing motion at her underside.

"Resist! Push your enemy away!" The ginger and white she-cat commanded. Moonpaw tried her best to throw Leafheart off of herself, but to no avail. Fatigue began to set into her limbs, until finally Moonpaw went limp beneath her mentor. At once, Leafheart stopped what she was doing and stepped away. "You're doing good," she started, "but you need to put more force into your actions. Even a move like that lunge you pulled could be more effective, if you threw yourself a little harder."

"I'm trying," Moonpaw griped, rising into a seated position. She was fighting to not fall asleep on her paws. "But it's hard. I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't," Leafheart assured. "That's why we fight with claws sheathed. Now come on, try attacking me again."

"Alright..." Moonpaw mumbled getting back into a crouch.
The pair continued battle practice for a little while longer, until it was obvious that Moonpaw had no energy left in her to fight with. Leafheart

stared at her with disappointment and concern; searching for an explanation as to why she was training so poorly today. How could Moonpaw possibly try to explain? Being honest and admitting she'd barely slept a wink last night would be best. But then Leafheart might suspect something was up. Could Moonpaw trust herself not to confess about her meeting with Hazepaw, if pressed?
Moonpaw blinked, suddenly remembering where she was. The memory of the events from earlier had clouded her mind. But now enough time had passed for Leafheart to decide to leave her alone. Moonpaw sighed, observing her clanmates from her perch above the camp to distract her troubled mind.
Emberpaw, Foxpaw, and Meadowpaw were sharing tongues near the center of camp. Meadowpaw idly chatted with the dilute tortoiseshell she-cat while Foxpaw groomed her, looking up at Emberpaw with sparkling eyes. Every now and then she glanced back at him, smirking playfully. Then he'd glance away, clearly flustered, before they'd do it all again a few heartbeats later.
Nearby, Tigerpaw sat beside Batpaw, whose ears were wrapped in cobwebs. The tabby she-cat told tales of battles she fought recently, while Batpaw smiled simply, nodding along as she listened. She seemed to appreciate the distraction from her painful wounds.
Beepaw came whizzing by, chasing Adderpaw as they tried to avoid her chatter. He came to settle himself beside Bluefang, who was sharing tongues with his mother, Greytuft.
By the fresh-kill pile, Wolfheart was sitting with Brightsky. She mewed to Brackentooth and Sagetail to join them for a meal. But by the time the other warriors padded over, Wolfheart had taken himself to sit away from the rest of the clan. He looked unsurely at Brightsky, who mewed an apology to her friends, before picking up a squirrel to go share with her mate in the corner. Then, Smokepaw padded over from the fresh-kill pile to speak with Moonpaw, grabbing her attention.

"Hey, what's wrong with Skunkpaw? He seems frustrated," the smokey tom meowed up at his sister.

Moonpaw responded; "He woke up from a nightmare." Then she scaled down from the tree, to speak with her brother on a more equal level. "He was trying tell me about how all his dreams keep coming true. I didn't believe him, and he got more upset."

"I see." Smokepaw hummed. "Maybe he just needs to get away from the clan for a little while. I know all of our mentors have been pushing us hard with battle training. Maybe we all need a break."

"A break?" Moonpaw parroted. "We can't just take a break from clan life, Smokey."

"Why not?" Smokepaw queried. "How about you, me, Magpiepaw, and Skunkpaw sneak off somewhere? As far from camp as we can go, without leaving the territory. Then we can hang out and do whatever we want."

Moonpaw thought for a moment. A break away from everything did sound pleasant. It had been a while since she'd spent true quality time with her littermates, too. Perhaps an idea like this would be beneficial for everyone involved. "Alright," she agreed after a heartbeat.

"Great. Let me go grab Magpiepaw," Smokepaw purred as he turned, padding off into the crowd of Treeclan's cats. He mewed a greeting to everyone he passed; Oakfur and Flamepath by the warrior's tree, Galestorm and Thrushmask sitting not too far off. Fogpaw tried to hold him up as he passed the Great Stump, but Smokepaw directed the other tom to speak to Nightpaw instead who sat in a sunny patch nearby. Finally, Smokepaw made it to Magpiepaw who was hanging out with Violetshade, Tinypaw, and Blackpaw. He said something to her that Moonpaw couldn't hear, before the pair finally made their way back over to her.

"Hi, Moon-moon," Magpiepaw greeted.

"Hi, Maggie," Moonpaw purred in response.

"Let's get Skunkpaw!" Smokepaw urged. His sisters nodded in agreement, the three of them walking together towards the nursery. Mapleshine and Silverhawk were practically blocking the entrance as they sat and shared gossip just outside. Magpiepaw padded up to them, dipping her head respectfully before speaking. "Is Skunkpaw available?" She asked.

"He finished with his session a little while ago," responded the

calico queen, Mapleshine. "The kits have taken to distracting him, now. But it's time for their feeding, so I'll send him out."
Magpiepaw purred thankfully as the queen slipped beneath the roots of the tree. A bit of mumbling could be heard before the sound of pawsteps drew closer to the nursery's entrance. Then out popped Skunkpaw with Honeykit on his shoulders.

"Come with us," Magpiepaw requested quietly, gesturing to their other littermates. Skunkpaw looked at Magpiepaw then at Moonpaw and back. Darkness still clouded his dull blue eyes. But he nodded, putting the kit down.
Moonpaw trilled with delight as the two came to stand beside herself and Smokepaw. Then the smokey gray tom flicked his tail, prompting his siblings to sneak with him into the dirtplace.
The smell here was rank. One of them would have to work with a collector and clean it soon. But this wasn't the time to think about that. Skunkpaw was climbing up into a tree with branches thickly covered in leaves. It would be hard for the clan to see them get out of camp from here. Magpiepaw followed him up, then Smokepaw, and finally Moonpaw made up the rear. She took one last glance behind to make she they weren't spotted. Then she followed her littermates through the bridging canopy, far out into Treeclan's woods.
Birds flitted by, singing songs to their chicks and mates as they went along their merry way. Eventually, the sound of roaring joined the noise, alerting the apprentices of how close they were to the Thunderpath. Carefully, the four littermates made their way back to the forest floor, staring ahead at the dangerous black stone river as it stretched out in front of them. A few monsters rushed past. Magpiepaw gulped at the sight of them. But Moonpaw pressed her flank against hers, offering to be the molly's crossing partner. Magpiepaw smiled at her sister, the two rushing across the Thunderpath just as soon as it was safe to. Smokepaw and Skunkpaw crossed together next. They were nearly across when another monster came rolling up, missing the toms by a fox-length as they settled on the opposite bank. Skunkpaw breathed a sigh of relief, while Smokepaw nudged him and took up the lead of his littermates.
A little farther ahead, in a clearing just shy of the Grassclan border, is where the group decided to settle down. Skunkpaw immediately

flopped over, rubbing himself against the grass. Moonpaw came to sit beside him, giggling at her brother's antics. Magpiepaw and Smoke stood beside each other, exchanging glances. Then they turned to face each other, holding their stares as if locked in competition. A heartbeat passed, then another, and finally Smokepaw blinked.

"Ha!" Magpiepaw mocked. "I won!"

"Nuh-uh," Smokepaw countered as he suddenly leaped onto the white and black patched she-cat. Magpiepaw yowled, wiggling and jumping from the smokey tom's grasp. She turned to run, Smokepaw quick to follow her. The two circled the clearing a few times, taking turns chasing each other. Moonpaw cheered, circling around her littermates as they began to play-fight.

"You're doing great, Smokepaw! Don't forget to dodge!" She meowed to her brother. "I believe in you, Magpiepaw! Show that fluffball who's boss!" She encouraged her sister. Skunkpaw rolled his eyes playfully, tucking his legs beneath himself as he got more comfortable. Moonpaw purred when she glanced back at them, pleased to see her littermate finally happy. Then her attention returned to Smokepaw and Magpiepaw. They had taken their battle to the ground, tussling and fighting for dominance. Smokepaw as the larger of the two easily gained the upper paw. But Magpiepaw used her wits to figure out how to escape his grasp, using the tom's size against him to hold him down.

"Great job, keep it up!" Moonpaw goaded. Behind her, the silver and white she-cat heard movement, before a weight fell upon her shoulders. She let out a surprised squeal, turning to see Skunkpaw clinging to her back. He parted his jaws to snatch up her scruff, pulling on it as he pressed his paws into her shoulders. Moonpaw grabbed Skunkpaw's ear in return. She tugged on it gently, her eyes shining with mischief as they met with the tom's. Skunkpaw feigned a growl, batting at Moonpaw's muzzle. The silver and white she-cat lost her grip from the distraction, collapsing onto the ground under her brother's heft. Skunkpaw laughed triumphantly.

"Wow, Stinky, you're getting pretty strong!" Moonpaw commented as she struggled to get away.

"Silverhawk's teaching me everything she knows," he responded. "Especially how to beat up bee-brained cats like you."
Moonpaw let out a *mrrow* of laughter, taking Skunkpaw's insult lightheartedly. Magpiepaw and Smokepaw soon came to join the pair, goading their littermates as they partook in their own play-fight. But just as Moonpaw had managed to flip Skunkpaw onto his side, something large came barreling through the trees. A pair of squeals followed after, grabbing the Treeclan apprentices' attention. Moonpaw gasped at the sight of the creatures.
They were tall, pale as a freshly bloomed primrose. They had fur only on the tops of their heads, and long lanky limbs that swung around with glee. *Are those...Twolegs?* Moonpaw wondered as Skunkpaw lazily flopped off of her. She gave a curious sniff, approaching the creatures as they came to crouch on the ground.

"What are you doing??" Magpiepaw whisper-hissed at her.

Moonpaw looked back at her. "It's ok, I don't think they're planning to hurt us," she reassured. "They're only kits. They probably just want to play."
Moonpaw took another few pawsteps forward, meeting the Twolegs' outstretched forepaws. One ran a paw along Moonpaw's spine, cooing sweetly as she arched into their touch. Seeing that the creatures were harmless, Skunkpaw and Smokepaw approached. Magpiepaw was more hesitant, but eventually caved and stepped up to meet the Twolegs too. Skunkpaw seemed the most fascinated by the creatures, rubbing his flanks along their folded legs as they pet him. Then he flopped onto his side, rolling to face his belly towards the sky. The Twolegs kits giggled, petting his delicate area with a gentleness cats could never expect from such creatures. Moonpaw purred as the larger of the kits scratched her cheek.

"I guess they're not so bad," Skunkpaw confessed as the other Twoleg reached out to pick him up.

Just then, a flash of white and black shot across the apprentices' vision. A cat had come to stand beside them, their fur bristling hostily. Moonpaw recognized this cat. It was Swiftpaw, the Grassclan apprentice she'd met at last night's Gathering. What was she doing here in Treeclan territory?

"Get away from them!" The Grassclan molly yowled at the Twolegs. Magpiepaw and Smokepaw exchanged confused glances. Moonpaw moved to get closer to her friend. And Skunkpaw rolled back onto his paws, standing to greet Swiftpaw. His eyes were glittering as he looked at her. Then, his attention drew back towards the Twolegs, who cooed for his affection. He gave another glance towards the white and black patched she-cat before moving closer to the kits. The smaller one finally made its move, scooping the unusual black and white tom up. Skunkpaw went without a fight, snuggling into its grasp. The Treeclan apprentices gasped. Then Swiftpaw lashed out, rushing forward to scratch the Twoleg kit. The tall creature cried out, dropping Skunkpaw without hesitance. Skunkpaw fell with a hard thud, wincing as he made contact with the ground. Then Swiftpaw hissed, turning to speak to the other apprentices.

"Run away, hurry, before it catches you!" She urged as she looked towards the second of the kits. It had worriedly jumped to its paws for its sibling, before turning towards the clan cats. It snarled at them, reaching out its paws to try and snatch them up. Swiftpaw took off as fast as she had come, looking over her shoulder to see if Moonpaw and her littermates were following. Magpiepaw was the first to follow the Grassclan apprentice's lead, Moonpaw and Smokepaw soon joining her.
The apprentices were panicking, fur fluff as they fled into the safety of a dense bush. They all gathered around its trunk, hugging it as if the shrub itself could pardon them from harm. Moonpaw panted, heart beating rapidly from the adrenaline rush. She glanced between the faces that surrounded her, taking a head count. Swiftpaw was the first cat she saw. The Grassclan she-cat had her attention towards the outside, eyes flickering as she focused on the Twolegs who clamored around beyond their shelter. Then Moonpaw looked to Smokepaw, who's head was lowered as he fought to catch his breath. Magpiepaw was the closest to the bush's center; her tail wrapped around it to anchor herself as she stared in Swiftpaw's direction, eyes as wide as a full moon. Moonpaw then scanned the rest of the bush, looking for the last of her littermates.

"Skunkpaw?" She called out quietly, glancing around again. "Where's Skunkpaw?" She bristled as she looked between the other cats crouching with her one last time. Dread began to creep into her

belly.
"Is he..?"

"They've got him," Swiftpaw confirmed, her voice sounding grim.

Immediately, Smokepaw jumped to his paws. "We have to help him!" He snapped, looking frantic. Moonpaw rested her tail against his side, attempting to calm her brother down. She'd never seen him so panicked.

"Not unless you want the Twolegs to nab you too!" Swiftpaw hissed, turning her attention back to the outside world.
Moonpaw followed her gaze. She could see the Twolegs had Skunkpaw in their cluthes; holding him belly up within their forepaws again. Two adults had come to join the kits. They'd taken the responsibility of keeping Skunkpaw captive. Moonpaw could hear them garbling words affectionately to the little black and white tom. It was almost sickening. Didn't those creatures notice how terrified Skunkpaw must be? Did they not care? Moonpaw wondered what Skunkpaw was going to do now, faced with so many enemies. No cat present could save him, Moonpaw was certain of that. So, would Skunkpaw fight? Would they try to escape on their own? Moonpaw wasn't sure. She could hardly make out her littermate's movements as the Twolegs crowded around him. Then they turned, stalking back into the forest where they came, taking their Treeclan catch along with them.

Suddenly, Magpiepaw let out a cry. "Skunkpaw!" In a flash she burst out from under the bush, ready to rescue her littermate. Smokepaw rushed after the reckless molly, Moonpaw following not too far behind. She raced ahead of her brother, pouncing on Magpiepaw before she could get any further. Smokepaw joined in, helping to hold her down. Swiftpaw came padding over just a heartbeat later.
"Skunkpaw! Skunkpaw come back to us! Please come back to us Skunkpaw!" Magpiepaw wailed some more, crouching beneath the weight of her siblings.

"He's gone," Swiftpaw breathed, lowering her head and ears.

Magpiepaw trembled in place, eyes brimming with tears. She squeezed them together tightly as her sorrow began to drip down

her cheeks. "Mama is going to be devastated," she whispered. Moonpaw and Smokepaw turned to look at one another, each holding back tears. Smokepaw's were the first to fall. Then, Moonpaw's followed suit, rolling down her cheeks and dripping off of her whiskers. Her heart ached painfully. She wanted her brother back.

"We need to go," she told her remaining siblings. "We have to rescue Skunkpaw."

"On our own?" Smokepaw questioned, voice waivering.

"We-we should go home first," Magpiepaw sniffled. "We'll need help from the clan."

"She's right," Moonpaw agreed, rising to her paws. "C'mon." She flicked her tail, prompting the other two cats to follow.

Chapter 14

Trembling legs and fluffed up fur were the sight that greeted Treeclan as their missing apprentices returned home. Cats had just begun to grow suspicious of their whereabouts by the time their paws touched the leaf littered floor. Wolfheart was the first to come up to meet them. His face shone with relief.

"Kits!" He called out, examining each of his frazzled children as they gathered around him. He expression shifted back to one of concern. "What's wrong? What's happened?"

Moonpaw pressed her body close to her father. Her heart was pounding in her chest, throat tight with thorns of grief that she fought to speak through.

"Skunkpaw...Skunkpaw's been kitnapped!" She choked out. Magpiepaw began to sob again, as if Moonpaw's words had been a remainder of what they'd witnessed.
The clan drew back in astonishment.

"Kitnapped!?" Sunpaw caterwauled. His ears folded back with panic.

"What do you mean?" Asked senior warrior, Oakfur.

"Who's taken him?" Brightsky demanded to know as she pushed her way through the crowd. She came to stand beside her family. The worry in her eyes barely masked the flame of fury which burned behind them; the passion of a mother's love. The desire to protect and save her kit was unmistakable.

"Twolegs..." Smokepaw began to explain. He held his posture upright, as the tremble in his pelt betrayed the brave face he was putting on. "The four of us were out playing in the woods when a pack of Twolegs came along. Their kits tried to play with us a bit. And then they tried snatching Skunkpaw."

"Sw-Swiftpaw of Grassclan interfered to help us flee," Magpiepaw

chimed with a trembling mew. "And then...and then Skunkpaw was taken!"
A murmur broke out among the crowd as the clan exchanged wary glances. Some, Moonpaw could hear, were worried this meant the Twolegs were after the clan again. While others speculated Skunkpaw's kitnapping was planned. That Grassclan somehow coordinated it to happen; to downsize Treeclan's ranks. Moonpaw could hardly believe some of the things her clanmates were saying. But all fell silent as Blazestar took his place upon the Great Stump to address them.

"It's tragic what's happened to Skunkpaw, today," Treeclan's leader began. "He was a good cat, and would have made a fine warrior of Treeclan, had they gotten the chance." The blazing tom's orange gaze settled upon Moonpaw and her littermates, a darkness settled within them. It was as if he were silently judging them. Like he thought *they* were to blame for Skunkpaw's kitnapping. Moonpaw felt a pit form in her belly.

"What do you plan to do about what's happened?" Wolfheart asked his leader. He stepped in front of his kits bravely, even as Blazestar stared him down.

"There's nothing to be done," Blazestar answered simply.

"We need to send out a search party," Brightsky counteted insistently, eyes round. She looked from her mate up to Blazestar. "We need to find Skunkpaw!"

"We can't waste the energy looking for some lost apprentice," Blazestar grunted with a flick of his tail.

Brightsky reared back for a moment in surprise. Her mouth hung half agape as searched for the right words to say. "That *apprentice* is my son! I cannot sit by comfortably knowing that he's been kitnapped by Twolegs. Who knows what they will do with him. He could be hurt!"

"The answer is *no*," Blazestar's meow was hostile, softening as he continued to speak. "We'd be risking other warriors' safety by sending them into Twolegplace to search. The Twolegs hunt our

clan enough as it is. I can't take the chance of that increasing. We've lost too many good cats recently, your son included. Besides, Skunkpaw is a brave tom. I know he will be alright, wherever he is. They're a great tracker just as you are. They'll find their way back to us if they can, I'm sure."

"Please, Blazestar. If there's a way to bring Skunkpaw back, then we must act." Brightsky's gaze hardened with seriousness as it met with the leader's. "I know you don't understand what it's like to lose a kit. But if it were one of your sons who went missing, wouldn't you do everything in your power to bring him home..?"

Blazestar was quiet for a few moments, head lowered slightly and eyes foggy with deep contemplation; or perhaps with fear of the possibility. "...Very well, Brightsky. We will send a patrol out to Twolegplace come sundown. If you're up for it, you may lead it. Bring whomever you'd like. But beware, and be safe. You will be held accountable if anyone should get harmed."

Brightsky dipped her head. "I understand. Thank you, Blazestar." Standing upright, the queen turned to speak with her remaining kits. "You three know Skunkpaw better than anyone. I'd like to ask you to join the search party, if you're up for it."

"Of course!" Moonpaw chirped, pelt tingling with excitement.

"We'll find that stupid fuzzball and bring him back home," Smokepaw agreed, looking a lot more relaxed than before. Although Moonpaw wondered if he was holding back his anxiety for the sake of his kin.

"I'll be going as well," Silverhawk meowed as she padded over to stand beside her fellow queen. "Skunkpaw's my apprentice. That practically makes them my son, too."

"And I want to come!" Volunteered Blazestar's son, Flamepaw. He scurried over to stand beside Smokepaw. "Skunkpaw's my best friend. I need to know if he's ok!"

"Alright," Brightsky agreed. "Anyone else? Wolfheart?"

Upon being prompted, Wolfheart raised his chin and gave a curt nod. "You couldn't get me to stay behind, even if all of Lionclan were attacking our camp."
Moonpaw let out a small *mrrow* of amusement. She loved when her father was so enthusiastic. And right now his determined demeanor would come in handy. It would rally the rest of the search party, to look as hard as they could for Skunkpaw.

"Well then...I'm going to wait in camp," decided Magpiepaw suddenly. "One of us should be here, in case Skunkpaw finds his way home alone."
Moonpaw knew that wasn't the only reason her sister was opting out of joining the patrol. She was too visibly upset still to serve as any help, and it was clear Magpiepaw knew that too.

"In that case," Blazestar meowed, stretching before jumping off his perch, "that should leave some room for me to join the search party."

"Blazestar?" Wolfheart questioned.

"I'm Treeclan's leader," Blazestar answered as he met with the other cats. "I have more lives to spare than any cat here. What's the point of having them if I don't go on dangerous missions like this? I'll come along, if only to act as bait should a dog, or Twoleg, or Starclan knows what else tries attacking. But I'm still holding you accountable in case that happens, Brightsky. "

Brightsky's eyes grew misty with gratitude. She dipped her head to the blazing orange leader again before lifting it to meet his eye. "Thank you," she mewed softly. "That should be enough cats, then. Our party will set out as soon as the last light fades."

"Oh, but can't I go too?" Tigerpaw asked eagerly as she moved to stand beside Moonpaw. Her yellow eyes were sparkling at the prospect of going into unknown territory.

"And me?" Sunpaw chimed, looking just as excited as he padded over to them.

"No, you're staying here with the rest of the clan," Blazestar asserted

to Tigerpaw. Then he turned pointedly towards Sunpaw, "And you, certainly not! There's more than enough apprentices in the search party. We don't need more coming along to cause issues. "

"Not fair," Tigerpaw muttered.

"Then why does Flamepaw get to go?" Sunpaw questioned, though there was no agitation in his tone.

"Because Flamepaw is more aware of his surroundings. He's better suited for a mission like this. It's nothing personal against either of you."
Then, Blazestar turned his attention towards the search party. "I suggest you all see Mothsong, and get your traveling herbs. Before anyone else tries joining the patrol. You'll be needing all your strength to travel through the Twolegplace. I'll be along shortly."

"Yes, Blazestar," meowed the search party, Moonpaw included. She followed behind her family as they made their way towards the weeping willow. Tigerpaw padded after her.

"This sucks!" she griped with an exaggerated pout. Sunpaw followed at her heels, giving a firm nod of agreement.

Moonpaw purred a little, brushing her tail along the tabby's shoulders. "Don't worry, Tig. I'm sure Blazestar will let you go on another mission in the future. But this one is serious."

"I know that," Tigerpaw growled a little. "It's not like I wouldn't treat it as such."

"But knowing you, you'd probably try and fight a kittypet to get answers out of them," Moonpaw purred, amusement in her tone. "And knowing you, you'd be more inclined to make some new friends while we're in the Twolegplace, Sunny." Tigerpaw's expression softened into a playful smile. She lifted a paw to bat at Moonpaw, then allowed the silver and white molly to go on ahead without her. She blocked Sunpaw whose mouth opened to quip something silly and unimportant before he gave up the attempt. Moonpaw waved her tail at her friends as she disappeared into the medicine den to prepare for the long search ahead.

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The last of the day's light faded behind the horizon, just as the Treeclan search party crossed the border into Twoleg territory. The eyes of her clanmates flashed in the faint glow of the Twoleg dens in the distance. Moonpaw glanced between each of them. The blue eyes of her mother stood out the most. Determination was held within them.

"We should all split up," Brightsky suggested, voice low. "We'll cover more ground that way."

"Is it wise to let the apprentices go off on their own, though?" Wolfheart wondered with a nervous twitch of his whiskers.

"They knew what they were getting into when they agreed to help search. They'll be just fine," Silverhawk assured.
Though Wolfheart seemed a little skeptical, he simply nodded in agreement. Then he picked a direction and began walking in it, disappearing behind some bushes. The other cats in the search party went off too, leaving only Moonpaw and Smokepaw to linger where they stood.

"I'm heading in that direction," Smokepaw stated, pointing with his tail. "Try not to go too far."

"I'll be nearby," Moonpaw promised before swinging around. Her eager paws carried her forward. She stuck her nose out with jaws parted slightly to taste the air. But nothing familiar caught her attention. So she wandered off farther, following a row of Twoleg dens lined with white wooden fences. Each seemed unique beyond their borders; some blue, some brick, and some white as clouds. Only a few remained lit inside, while some nearly branchless trees loomed above Moonpaw's head. Each had a light source shining from a single protruding branch, casting Moonpaw's shadow along the dirt path she tredded. Moonpaw hoped the sight of her silhouette would not alert a predator to her presence.

"Hello there!" Moonpaw froze in place, slowly turning to see who had called out to her. In a garden just a fox-length behind her was a silver tabby kittypet. Her long fur swayed in the gentle breeze, and
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the yellow bell on her collar jingled as she carefully balanced herself on the fence posts marking the end of her territory. She had a warm smile on her face, and a curious gleam in her eyes. "I've never seen you around here before. Are you new to the neighborhood?"

"No, I'm just passing through," Moonpaw replied, relaxing and raising her tail.

"Oh really? Where are you from?" The kittypet asked curiously.

"I come from the forest." Monpaw tilted her head in the direction of home.

The kittypet perked up at her answer. "Does that mean you're clan cat?"

Moonpaw wondered how a kittypet knew what a clan was. Still, she lifted her chin proudly at the acknowledgment. "I am.

The kittypet trilled in response. She seemed strangely elated by the news. "How neat. Oh my name is Misty, by the way!"

"I'm Moonpaw," responded the apprentice. She was glad to find someone so friendly here to talk to. Hopefully Misty would have some useful information to share.

"Yknow Moonpaw, you look kind of familiar. I wonder if we've met before? Or perhaps I've met one of your kin?" Misty queried.

"Actually, I'm here looking for one of my kin! Maybe the cat you're thinking of is the same?" Moonpaw started to grow hopeful.

"It's a possibility! Who is it you're trying to find? Your mother?" Misty guessed. Her eyes twinkled in a way that spoke of a secret longing she must be carrying. Moonpaw hated to disappoint her.

"No, my brother. They're a really fluffy black cat with white streaks, and the most kitten blue eyes you could ever find in an eight moon old cat. Do you think you've seen him?"

Hearing this, Misty deflated. "Oh. No, I'm afraid not..."

Moonpaw purred a little and forced a smile, trying to cheer both herself and the kittypet up. "Well, thank you anyways, Misty," she mewed with a small head dip. "By the way, what's the name of the cat you think I remind you of? Maybe I can ask around and help you find them."

"No no, it's alright. You just remind me of a cat I love... But she's moved on to live a grander life than I can give her here. I'm not trying to find her. I'd just hoped to find out if she's finally happy."

"Well, I'm sure she must be. But I'm also willing to bet that wherever your love is now, she's missing you too."

"That's a kind thought." Misty sighed. "I'm sorry that I couldn't be more helpful to you, Moonpaw. But I wish you luck with finding your brother. If I see any cat that looks like your description though, I'll tell them you were here."

"Thank you again, Misty. Goodbye," Moonpaw meowed, continuing to walk the dusty path ahead.

"Goodbye, little snowflake. Take care!" Misty called after her, her voice fading the farther Moonpaw traveled from her garden. Moonpaw went back to her search, sniffing around for signs of Skunkpaw. Then she turned a corner three bear-lengths ahead and Smokepaw's scent made it to her nostrils. His voice quickly followed it.

"Moon, come here! I think I've got a lead!"
Bristling, Moonpaw raced to where her littermate waited. Then she skidded to a stop in front of another white fenced den. Here, Smokepaw stood atop the posts, a tom with a brilliantly ginger pelt beside him. The kittypet was chubby, with a long perfectly groomed coat and an odd trianglar head. Smokepaw seemed to be intrigued by the other cat, eyes gleaming as he looked at the pampered tom. Or maybe Smokepaw was just that excited about the information the kittypet had to share.

"Moonpaw, this is Oliver. He said he might have seen Skunkpaw pass by here!" Smokepaw mewed with excitement.

Moonpaw looked up at Oliver, squinting her eyes as his bright pelt glittered in artificial light. "Is it true? Do you know where our littermate is?"

Oliver gave a nonchalant shrug. "I might. I saw a cat matching the description Smokepaw gave earlier today. He was laying in the back window of a car as it drove past."

"A...car?" Moonpaw echoed, confused.

"A, uh," Oliver glanced at Smokepaw, "a 'monster', I think is what you wild cats call them." Smokepaw nodded in recognition, Moonpaw humming curiously. "Anyways, I recognized that monster. It belongs to some neighborhood housefolk. They don't live far from here. I could take you to their den, if you'd like."

Moonpaw perked up at the offer, nodding her head enthusiastically. "Please," she responded, almost sounding desperate. Oliver chuckled at her reaction. Then he gave his body a stretch, leaping down from his fence onto the dirt path. Smokepaw followed right behind, standing close to the other tom as the three cats began their walk to the mentioned Twoleg den. They padded around a corner or two, Oliver and Smokepaw chatting quietly as they went. Moonpaw hung back a little, keeping alert for possible danger. Eventually, Moonpaw started scenting Silverhawk nearby. She trilled out, trying to catch the Den Mother's attention. At her call, the silver and black tabby came trotting from up ahead, looking to the apprentice as she approached. She looked expectant, hopeful even.

"We've got a lead," Moonpaw told her. Silverhawk's eyes lit up. Then she turned back in the direction she came from.

"Wait here," she told the three younger cats. "Your mother's close by. She'll want to follow you." Then, the queen disappeared from sight again. After a few moments, Brightsky came running over, Blazestar and Silverhawk not far behind. She rubbed her flank against Moonpaw's as she joined her daughter alongside the two younger toms. Blazestar eyed Oliver suspiciously as he approached, while Silverhawk nudged Treeclan's leader to keep him from becoming hostile. Oliver tipped his head in greetings to the warriors, glancing between each of them.

"There's more cats looking for your brother?" Oliver asked Smokepaw, who nodded in response. "Wow. Who knew one kitten would be so popular." The kittypet's comment sounded playful. It was clear he wasn't taking the situation seriously at all. Moonpaw felt her belly twist as she realized that fact. Had Smokepaw not told Oliver about what happened to Skunkpaw?

"Popularity has nothing to do with it," Silverhawk replied, pulling Moonpaw from her thoughts. "Skunkpaw was taken from us. We want to find him because we care about him."

Oliver's eyes grew a little wider. His expression confirmed Moonpaw's suspicion. "Of course," he breathed, voice sounding softer, more serious now. "But I'm sure he's alright. No housefolk would ever harm their pet."

Although the kittypet's words were meant to be reassuring, it set off something in Blazestar. "Skunkpaw isn't a pet. He's a Treeclan cat!" He growled. But Oliver was left unphased.

"It's probably hard for a kittypet to understand," Moonpaw figured, glancing at her leader.

"Not true," Oliver countered, pointing his muzzle to promt the search party onward. "I have a friend who ran away to be a warrior. I understand the call to be wild...kind of. But maybe clan cats can experience a call to peace. There's nothing wrong with being a house cat."

Blazestar growled some more. But Silverhawk ran her tail along his spine, calming Treeclan's leader.

"But Skunkpaw was stolen away," Brightsky reiterated. "It's not like he came to Twolegplace willing."

Oliver hummed. "I guess in that case, it makes sense to worry. But Skunkpaw didn't seem too distressed when I saw him earlier. So he's probably fine."

"I hope you're right," Smokepaw murmured, moving closer to the bright orange kittypet.

A silence fell over the patrol as they snuck along. They hid a few times in the nearby shrubs when a stray Twoleg or two walked past. One had a small dog with it, who stopped to yap at the clan cats' hiding place. Moonpaw unsheathed her claws, ready to strike the mongrel should it stick its muzzle where it didn't belong. Instead, the Twoleg gave a harsh tug to its lead, pulling the creature back onto the desired path. When they'd left, the search party continued on again. Eventually a small den came into the view, near the end of the dirt path. A short brick wall surrounded it on all side. But the entrance was left ajar, just wide enough for cats to slip through.

"Are you sure this is the right place?" Silverhawk questioned quietly as the search party paused at the territory's threshold.

"This is where I've seen the monster rest," Oliver confirmed. Moonpaw peered past where the party stood, sweeping the territory for signs of the mentioned monster. But it was nowhere in sight. And the scent of it barely lingered in the air. But another scent did. Brightsky noticed it, too, Moonpaw realized. Her mother's nose twitched, mouth opening to draw the smell over her scent glands. After a heartbeat, her eyes lit up.

"I smell him...my kit!" Brightsky breathed, rushing ahead. Blazestar meowed for her to wait, but it was too late. Moonpaw moved to follow her mother as Brightsky stalked skillfully along the grass. She was approaching the Twoleg den as if she were hunting a prized squirrel. Moonpaw kept a few paces behind, glancing to see Blazestar and the others trying to catch up. Blazestar managed to pull ahead, running at full speed to round Brightsky and stand in her path. His posture was imposing, expression stern.

"What do you think you are doing? Don't just rush in without thought!" The leader hissed.

"I smell Skunkpaw," Brightsky repeated. She looked like she was trying not to cry. Her voice sounded so hopeful, nearly relieved. Blazestar was the opposite.

"I'm going to scout ahead," he meowed to everyone. "Wait here for my call." Then he turned, walking to the other side of the den. The rest of the search party gathered together, listening intently, in case

of danger and news. Not long after, Blazestar caterwauled. Moonpaw was the first to find him. Blazestar had managed to find a way into the Twoleg den, a dark expression on his face. Moonpaw's heart dropped.
"Come see," he motioned for his cats to come through a window with him.

The inside of the den was dark, and cold. Walls expanded around them, as tall as trees. The place reeked of Twoleg. But the inside of the den was devoid of anything. No bedding, no strange objects. Just walls, a floor, and a few scraps of trash. The place looked abandoned. But Moonpaw could smell Skunkpaw in here, strongly. Even if the scent was growing stale. Brightsky caught it, too. She sniffed at the corner of a nearby wall, rubbing her cheek on it.

"Skunkpaw marked here. I can smell his fur," she mewed quietly. "He was here.... he left us signs that he was here...."

"But now..?" Silverhawk asked, glancing from Brightsky to Oliver.

"They must have moved away," the kittypet mewed in realization. "That has to be why Skunkpaw was in the car--uh, monster. House cats rarely get put inside of them. Unless we're going to the vet, or being moved someplace. And that would explain why the house is empty, too."

"So where did they go?" Moonpaw wondered. "Where did they take Skunkpaw?"

Oliver shook his head sadly. "I can't say... They could be anywhere. I'm...I'm really sorry."
Hearing his words, Brightsky sunk to the fuzzy floor. She let out a quiet sob, covering her muzzle with her paws. The rest of the Treeclan search party exchanged glances.

"...We can't give up yet," Smokepaw piped suddenly. He stood up taller, puffing up his chest. "Dad and Flamepaw are still out there searching. We should be, too. Just because the Twolegs moved camp doesn't mean they aren't still in the area. Let's keep looking!" Smokepaw's speech seemed to give everyone the encouragement they needed to keep going.

With little hesitance the party slipped back out of the Twoleg den. Oliver helped Moonpaw and Smokepaw talk with other kittypets in the area, while Brightsky, Blazestar, and Silverhawk went off on their own again. They searched the Twolegplace for the rest of the night, sniffing around and yowling Skunkpaw's name until the sun began to rise.

At dawn's first light, Treeclan's search party gathered by the border, thanking and leaving Oliver behind. They each spoke of their findings; of discussions made and smells caught. But not anything important to share. It was as if Skunkpaw had disappeared from the earth. Depressed, the patrol made its way back into the woods, finally ready to mourn the lost apprentice with the rest of the clan.

Chapter 15

A half moon passed. The day ahead was warm; the sun sneaking beams through gaps in the trees above Oceanclan's heads. They heated Hazepaw's shoulders, lulling him into relaxation. The clan was still stuck in the Forest Patch. Hazepaw had come to tolerate living there by this point. There were plenty of good hunting opportunities, and he supposed living on soil instead of sand wasn't as terrible as he'd originally thought. Having the chance to battle Treeclan every now and then was an added, invigorating bonus. The other Oceanclan apprentices had taken to their new camp just as well, if not better. Even the self-conscious Whisperpaw seemed to train better in the woods than on the shore.
Today, Hazepaw was sitting beside Otterpaw, watching as she coached Whisperpaw on how to preform some basic fighting stances. They'd all gotten along since Urchinpaw's call for truce a while back. Otterpaw became fast friends with Whisperpaw. And Hazepaw was especially nicer; instead of growing hostile or defensive towards his denmates, he now welcomed their company. He felt honored to be included in any if their activities. Even if the other cats annoyed him sometimes. He only hoped that he would not mess things up.

"Make sure you place your paws apart," Otterpaw meowed, pulling Hazepaw from his daydreaming, "but not too wide. You don't want to give your enemies any room to pull them out from under you."

"I'll try..." Whisperpaw mumbled doing her best to follow instructions.

"Good. But try to keep your body low along with your leg stance." Otterpaw rose to her paws, demonstrating what she was explaining. "Like this."
Whisperpaw tried to copy, then allowed herself to sink to the forest floor with a sigh. It was as if she were giving up on trying already.

"What's wrong, Whisperpaw?" Hazepaw decided to ask. It wasn't like pretty grey tabby to act so glum.

"I don't want to do this anymore..." she mumbled in response.

"That's alright. We can practice something else. How about I show you the way we stand to hook a fish?" Otterpaw suggested.
Whisperpaw shook her head. "I could teach you how to crack open hard shelled prey..?"

"I don't really want to learn warrior stuff," Whisperpaw answered, casting a longing glance towards two fallen, overlapping trees which housed the medicine cats. Then her gaze flickered to the leader's den, settled within an old badger set. "But I know I have no other choice..."
Otterpaw rested her tail over Whisperpaw's back supportively. Hazepaw felt a pang of sympathy for his denmate. As the daughter of Wavestar, Whisperpaw had an expectation placed on her shoulders. She was one of three potential heirs to Oceanclan's rule. And as such, she wasn't allowed much of a choice when it came to her job. Every cat knew Whisperpaw wanted to be a healer. But when asked during her apprentice ceremony, she insisted she would train as a warrior instead. It was definitely due to her parent's pressure. Not by her own willing. Hazepaw wished there was a way to change things for her. For now, he would sit quietly and help support the young cat he had come to know as a friend.

"Having fun over there, Whisperpaw?" Currentpaw, Whisperpaw's brother, called out as he returned to the temporary camp with his mentor. He stood about a fox-length away, his muzzle twisted into a mocking sneer. "Still trying to figure out how to do a simple hunting crouch?"
Whisperpaw, being the quiet hearted soul she was, said nothing in response.
"Yknow at this rate you'll never gain dad's favor, since you keep moping around like a sundried starfish. What kind of leader could *you* be if you can't even preform simple warrior moves?"

"Why don't you get off her tail already, Currentpaw? Whisperpaw's doing her best," Otterpaw jumped to the defense. Currentpaw marched up to her, getting in the brown molly's face. Hazepaw bristled, bunching his muscles in preparation for a brawl.

"How 'bout you butt outta family business, sweetheart?" The white

and gray tom growled.

"Keep talking and I'll show you how '*sweet*' I really am, dirt-breath," Otterpaw threatened, baring her fangs in a snarl. A tense heartbeat passed. Then Currentpaw clicked his teeth giving his eyes a roll. He shot Whisperpaw a spiteful glare before turning and padding off to another part of camp. Hazepaw relaxed instantly. Though Currentpaw was confident in himself, Hazepaw knew that the white and gray tom would be no match for Otterpaw in a fight. Otterpaw had two moons worth of training under her pelt. She was already much stronger than he was. And it seemed like Currentpaw understood that as well.

Hazepaw would bet later on, the younger tom would boast about what a great quality that was in himself. To pick and choose his battles. Though Hazepaw knew that wasn't true. Currentpaw was always quick to start a scuffle when they were both in the nursery. In fact, besides Urchinpaw, Currentpaw was the cat Hazepaw fought with most growing up. Sometimes for no reason. Just to *"hone his skills."* Currentpaw reminded Hazepaw a lot of Pebblestar The Manevolent, who happened to be Currentpaw's aunt. Their temperaments were described to be almost identical. That worried Hazepaw a little. He was sure that Currentpaw would make a terrible leader one day. He hoped one of the tom's sisters would be chosen instead. Though Hazepaw didn't hold out much hope for Stonepaw. Stonepaw was far too scatterbrained, and had a tendency to follow others rather than make decisions for themself. She'd probably pass on the offer for deputyship if Wavestar decided to give it to her.

Out of the three littermates, only Whisperpaw held the patience and thoughtfulness that Oceanclan needed. The clan was trying to avoid having another fight happy or careless ruler after all. Whisperpaw would be the perfect fit. But Hazepaw knew the clan would never accept her if she couldn't be a strong warrior. Wavestar may have the choice of a successor, but nobody would listen to a cat who wasn't strong enough to demand their respect. The last thing the white tom wanted to see was Oceanclan rejecting their best choice for future leader. And so, he decided he would step up and help Otterpaw train Whisperpaw to be better. Even if she wasn't happy as a warrior, that didn't mean she couldn't get stronger, right?

"Maybe Currentpaw is right," Hazepaw piped suddenly. "Maybe Whisperpaw needs to try a little harder." He rose to his paws, walking up to Whisperpaw's side. He grabbed her by the scruff, pulling her back onto her feet. Whisperpaw let out a small noise of surprise, looking at the tom with full moon wide eyes. Hazepaw dropped into a crouch, giving the molly an expectant look in return. Whisperpaw dropped to copy his stance, her form almost perfect this time around. Hazepaw moved to readjust her paws for her.
"You got it! Now stand upright and do it again," he commanded, observing as Whisperpaw did as she was told. Otterpaw watched on, her gaze looking judgemental. Yet she said nothing, continuing to oversee Hazepaw's teaching method. She could probably tell how his technique was working better on Whisperpaw than her previous work had.
"Good. Now try and strike forward. Hook you paw like this." Hazepaw demonstrated a front-paw blow. Whisperpaw once again copied her denmate's movement, her strike coming off as hesitant and slow. Hazepaw smacked her over the head with his tail. "Do it again," he demanded. Whisperpaw tried once more, her forepaw and paw a little shaky. But her speed improved this time. Again, Hazepaw struck Whisperpaw and made her throw another strike. Whisperpaw's paw trembled harder now. Still, she was getting better.
"This time try and thrust forward with your swipe," he suggested, giving another demonstration. He crouched slightly, lunging himself forward before slashing at the air in front of him. Whisperpaw nodded then apprehensivly followed the tom's lead. When she lunged forward, the young molly nearly tripped over her own paws. She trembled, looking up at Hazepaw with the same wide eyed expression.
Hazepaw struck her yet again over the head. "No. Keep your stance firm. Go again."
When Whisperpaw moved forward this time her movement was more fluid. Yet she whimpered, as if succeeding was almost painful for her. "Don't whine. Do the motion again!" Hazepaw's voice was stern now, in a way he thought Sandybreeze might take up if he were to falter in his fighting.

"Hazepaw-" Otterpaw tried to interject, but Hazepaw silenced her with a flick of his ear. Whisperpaw struck out once again, her

movement and strike perfect. The only thing that wasn't yet again was her stance. Whisperpaw crumpled under her own weight, falling to the floor once she'd struck the air as Hazepaw had shown. Suddenly she began to sniffle. Then her noise turned into more of a sniveling, until finally Whisperpaw began to cry.
Hazepaw hesitated for a couple of heartbeats trying to figure out what went wrong. *Maybe she's got some of the stubbornness her littermates have, deep down,* he guessed. *I know she doesn't want to do this; doesn't want to be a warrior. But she can't give up now while she's doing so good.* And so, Hazepaw raised his tail once more to push his denmate to get back onto her paws and back to practicing. But before he could make the strike, Otterpaw rushed in front of Whisperpaw.

"That's enough!" She hissed, eyes narrowed in anger. "Look at what you've done. You made her cry!"

"She's probably just overwhelmed. She'll calm down with more practice," Hazepaw assured.

"No, Hazepaw. She's done enough for now. And so have you," Otterpaw responded harshly.

"I was just trying to help," Hazepaw reasoned. He couldn't understand why the halfclan molly was so upset.

"Well stop helping! Your 'help' is only going to make this whole warrior training experience worse for her." Gently, Otterpaw turned to check on Whisperpaw. "Are you alright? Come on now, you're ok to stand. That's it. Good." She crooned. Then, she turned back to Hazepaw. "You know, I thought you were starting to get better. That maybe you weren't as much of an aggressive jerk as you were when we first met. Guess I was wrong.... Do yourself a favor and stay away from us from now on." Otterpaw swept her tail around the younger molly behind her, guiding her away. "Come on, Whisperpaw."
Hazepaw watched the two she-cats hurry off to another part of camp, his pelt prickling with nerves. Had what he'd done been so wrong? He didn't think so. His technique was working, helping Whisperpaw improve. That's what Otterpaw wanted. So why was she so mad?

Hazepaw began to groom his fur, tidying it up in an attempt to calm himself down. A while later, when he was nearly finished, Hazepaw scented Wavestar emerging from his den.

"Hazepaw!" The leader's voice boomed as he called for the apprentice's attention. Hazepaw stiffened, turning around to look at his leader. There was a serious expression set on the gray and white tabby's face. "My den. Now."
Hazepaw stood up, walking himself to over to the bushes which hid the leader's shelter. Wavestar ushered him down the old badger set when he drew near enough, allowing the tom to get comfortable as they both settled inside. A silence hung in the air, one which neither tom was eager to break. Hazepaw did his best to look confident in the face of the leader, but he knew that no matter how he presented himself, he was still in trouble.
"Otterpaw told me how you were treating my daughter earlier," Wavestar finally began, his voice calm but firm. "Care to explain yourself?"

Hazepaw fought back the urge to bristle. *Otterpaw snitched on me..? That lousy little pollen sniffer!* "Did she tell you about how I was trying to help?" He asked, keeping his voice as even as possible. "Because I was doing better at teaching Whisperpaw than she was."

"Otterpaw explained that, yes," Wavestar responded, the tip of his tail swaying to-and-fro. "But she also explained how you went about doing so. Do you really think dragging Whisperpaw around and swatting her with your tail was the most appropriate way to reinforce her behavior; good or bad?"

"I didn't drag her around!" Hazepaw defended. "And I thought maybe, if I corrected Whisperpaw's mistakes, it would help her realize what she was doing wrong so she could fix herself."

Wavestar narrowed his eyes. Though he was trying to be patient it was obvious that he was starting to grow irritated with the fluffy white tom. "But you corrected her by hitting her. And in the end you upset her. Are you still so certain that your actions were necessary?"

Hazepaw hesitated before replying. "Yes. I...I was only doing what I

thought was best. I don't regret how I went about things. It was helping. Whisperpaw was doing better. I think she got a little overwhelmed, that's all. She knows I wasn't trying to hurt her." Wavestar gave him a look. "She knows that, right..?"

In response Wavestar heaved a sigh. "I understand that your intentions were good, Hazepaw. But your actions still caused Whisperpaw harm. Even if she is not physically hurt. It wasn't right of you to push her like that. You are not Whisperpaw's mentor." Rising to his paws, the large gray and white tabby continued. "And so, for your actions and lack of remorse, I'm going to have to punish you. You will be in charge of caring for the elders over the next quarter moon. Without any help from your denmates. On top of that, you are to give your share of prey to Beckycreek tonight."

"What?!" Hazepaw exclaimed. "That's not fair!"

"What you did to Whisperpaw wasn't fair either, Hazepaw. I trust that this punishment will teach you to be more respectful to others. Especially those who are weaker than you are. You should go spend the rest of the day thinking about what you've done. I suspect you will be very busy tomorrow."
Hazepaw parted his jaws to argue. But as he thought of things to shoot back at Wavestar, no sound would come out. Instead Hazepaw dipped his head, accepting his punishment. He turned and padded out of the den without another word, tail dragging in the soil as he went.

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Sunhigh the next day brought with it a headache. Hazepaw was clearing out the elders' den, dragging old nests out to replace with new. But the clan's retired warriors weren't pleased with the way he was tidying up.

"You bring that back!" Snapped Dolphintail, the clan's oldest elder. Her blind eyes blazed with fury as she lunged for Hazepaw with startling accuracy. Hazepaw was barely quick enough to avoid her smack. "That pelt's got my favorite shell in it!"

"Why would you keep a seashell tucked into your nest you old sea
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hag?" Hazepaw spat back, rummaging through the smelly old bedding to find the special trinket.

"How else am I supposed to keep track of it, you ignorant fuzzball?" Dolphintail growled, snatching the shell back once Hazepaw had uncovered it.

"Didn't your mother ever teach you to respect your superiors?" Hissed another of the three elders, Oystersplash, who had been watching the scene close by.

"Some superiors you are. You can't even clean out your own nests!" Hazepaw snorted, wagging his tail violently.

"We've earned the right to not have to do things like that anymore. You think we didn't have to do exactly as you are now when we were 'Paws?" Oystersplash snarled back.

"Kits these days, don' know 'ow ta respect their eldas!" rasped a pale ginger elder, washing her small white paws. Hazepaw glared at the old she-cat resisting the urge to snarl. *"That ginger tabby is Chloe,"* he remembered Eelnose telling him when he was small. *"She used to be a kittypet. In Greenleaf she won't even touch a flea weight's worth of prey; only twoleg food. And in Leafbare, she'll only sleep in nests lined with soft twoleg pelts. She's as typical as they come."* Hazepaw recalled his mother sneering, sounding as if she were ready to cough up bile as she spoke those words. He also remembered her saying the old ginger cat hadn't ever done anything for the clan. She came to Oceanclan half starved, joining their elders upon entry to their ranks. She acted as if she'd earned special rights, like the other two old cats had. And everyone in the clan catered to her, too. *I won't let kittypets soften the clan like that when I'm leader one day,* Hazepaw decided as he stalked away in silence to fetch new bedding. Hazepaw had been thinking hard about Oceanclan's future since the day before. He realized now that maybe Wavestar's bloodline was no longer capable of ruling over the clan. And maybe Sandybreeze was right; perhaps a single cat's kin should not be the only choice for leader. As far as Hazepaw knew only Oceanclan followed that tradition. And look where it had gotten them in recent years. The dynasty brought forth one of the worst leaders in the Land's Star's history, and it could potentially happen again with one of

Wavestar's kits. Currentpaw was too rash. Stonepaw was too ditsy. And Whisperpaw was too weak willed. Oceanclan needed a strong cat to lead it; someone who could prove to the other clans how mighty they were, while also being strategic and a role-model. Hazepaw knew he could be that cat. He was determined to prove it. If Sandybreeze couldn't convince Wavestar that it was time for change, then Hazepaw would. He was ready to learn all he could from the clan's current deputy, and then he would push himself to surpass her. But for now, he had to deal with his stupid punishment.

Hazepaw disposed of the elders old bedding at last, bringing over new to lay out beneath the old fallen elm tree. He fluffed Chloe's nest, then smoothed out Oystersplash and Dolphintail's before calling quits on his work for the time being-before he'd get into another argument with one of the old fools.

Hazepaw trudged his way over to the apprentice's den, pausing to exchange looks with Urchinpaw as he passed by a few fox-lengths away. The wiry black tom peered at Hazepaw sympathetically, before Silverdrop padded up to his other side and rested her tail on his shoulder. Urchinpaw swung around to see his mentor shake her head slowly before leading him away from Hazepaw's line of sight. Hazepaw watched after them an extra heartbeat, stomach twisting a bit inside himself. Was Urchinpaw pitying him? Or was he just concerned because they were friends now? Hazepaw couldn't know for sure. So instead of dwelling on it, he
squeezed into the den and got into his nest. After washing and settling himself down, Hazepaw curled up for a well deserved nap.

When he woke up, the white tom found himself in an unfamiliar place. Dark trees loomed over him on all sides, and a thick fog pooled around his paws. The underbrush surrounding him was eerily quiet, like it was devoid of any life.

When Hazepaw stood to look up, he could barely make out the sky. It was strangely dark, as if the stars were hidden behind a wall of dense clouds.

Where am I? Hazepaw wondered as he began to explore. The air smelled stale as he lifted his muzzle to sniff it. The forest seemed devoid of anything recognizable. Not the road, nor any landmarks Oceanclan had made to find their way around. Hazepaw had a feeling he wasn't lost somewhere in the Forest Patch. Had he

somehow wandered into Treeclan territory? *The last thing I remember is falling asleep.* That's when it hit him. Hazepaw was dreaming. No wonder why everything seemed so strange. It wasn't real. But then, why did it *feel* real?
Suddenly something rustled in the bushes behind him, breaking the stillness that once crowded him. The fur on the back on Hazepaw's neck began to stand involuntarily, as if he were in danger. Hazepaw unsheathed his claws, ready to face whatever nightmare creature came to meet him. Then the shrubs parted, revealing a dense cloud of traveling fog. From it, Hazepaw could make out one gleaming eye.

"Who are you!?" The white tom hissed, arching his back. Then the figure became a bit clearer. It was another cat, a molly by the scent. She was large, but most of the little details of her pelt were hard to distinguish. The most Hazepaw could see was that she was silver with wavy tabby stripes, decorated with scars. She also had a long tuft of fur covering half of her face. The one eye the tom could see looked hollow, like it belonged to a ghost.

"Who are you..?" Hazepaw asked again, this time his voice less hostile.
The strange she-cat lifted her muzzle slightly, smirking.

"My name is Sea Breeze," introduced the ghost, "And I'm here to help you find your way."

Chapter 16

"...*You're* Sea Breeze..? Hazepaw asked almost skeptically. He took a step back, eyeing the stranger who had materialized in his dream. The spirit-like cat appeared to be as Sea Breeze was described; at least from whatever details Hazepaw could see of her through the fog. But it was hard to believe that the fabled ghost was here to see *him* of all cats. Out of everyone in Oceanclan--in the *Land's* Star--why did Sea Breeze seek out Hazepaw specifically? Was he truly so lost that such a wise spirit thought he needed guidance? Hazepaw didn't think of himself that way. In fact, he felt as if he'd finally found his path in life, after moons of searching for a purpose. But did the ancient spirit think otherwise? She must, if she were really here visiting him in dreams.

"I am," answered the ghost, Sea Breeze, as her fog clouded tail swayed. "You've been getting yourself into trouble, Hazepaw; for almost your entire life. It's time we harness that drive of yours and put it to good use. So, I've come to give you guidance. Think of this as an offer of mentorship. And of friendship."

Hazepaw took a heartbeat of pause, considering the weight of the ancient cat's words. Then he snorted. "Thanks, but I've already got those. Sandybreeze is an awesome mentor. And I have Whisperpaw, Otterpaw, Urchinpaw, *and* Moonpaw as my friends!" There was something gnawing at his belly as Hazepaw spoke those words. Like doubt had begun to eat him. But the fluffy white tom tried to shake the feeling away with a ruffle of his fur. He didn't want Sea Breeze picking up on it. Judging by her expression, however, she already could.

"Are they, truly? While Sandybreeze is a decent mentor, she can't teach you the things that I can. Nor can you exactly call those apprentices you mentioned 'friends'. Urchinpaw is too unpredictable in his feelings. Moonpaw is a Treeclan cat, who needs to focus on her own clan. And Whisperpaw and Otterpaw are upset with you right now. They probably don't even want to talk to you, and that's

not how friends act."
The ghostly silver she-cat slithered her way closer to Hazepaw, her essence seeming to wrap around him like a cloack.
"You have so much drive, Hazepaw. So much power and sense of sureness. Yet you use it to pick petty, useless fights. And you let your hatred of outsiders cloud your judgement of them."
Sea Breeze moved to Hazepaw's flank, sweeping her tail around him. Her fur smelled of the ocean, salty and crisp. It flooded Hazepaw's nostrils and almost made him feel nostalgic. Yet, he had to resist gagging. Like the scent was trying to drown him.
"But with *my* help, you can harness your capabilities and use them for something good. Like becoming Oceanclan's next deputy."
That got Hazepaw's attention. His eyes lit up with excitement, and he smiled up at the ghost, hopeful.
"With my ancient knowledge, I can show you how you can become the greatest deputy Oceanclan has ever had. Whaddya say, friend? Will you accept my offer?"

As much as it excited Hazepaw, he felt himself hesitating to agree. Something in the back of his mind was screaming at him to run away, and never come back to this place. But Hazepaw chalked that up to be his nerves. His pride might also be getting in the way of his acceptance for help from the famous spirit. Hazepaw knew he was a good cat, deep down; one who could do great things all on his own. But with help, could he become something *more*?

After a tense few heartbeats of silence, Hazepaw finally meowed; "...I'll do it. I'll train with you."
The silver tabby spirit smirked, a low purr rumbling in her throat like thunder.
Hazepaw knew the story of Sea Breeze well. She brought fortune to all the cats she smiled favor upon. Even with a nagging feeling festering in the back of his mind, Hazepaw knew accepting the spirit's help would be wise, in the end.

Sea Breeze praised him justly for the decision. "Good. You're very smart, Hazepaw. I look forward to working with you."

"Likewise," Hazepaw agreed. Then he flicked his tail, feeling a bit awkward. "So, how does this work exactly?"

Sea Breeze tilted her head, pulling away from Hazepaw a little. "We'll train together at night when you sleep. All you have to do is think of me, and this forest, and you will be brought right back here. Simple, right?"

Hazepaw shrugged. "I guess so. But since I'm here now, does that mean we'll start training?"

"Not today," Sea Breeze mewed as she started to pad away. "There's no reason to try, anyways. You'll be waking up momentarily. We'll begin tomorrow night instead, when you have more time to focus."

"And all I have to do is think of this place, right?" Hazepaw checked. "Where are we, anyway?"

Sea Breeze paused in her stride, turning her head to look back at Hazepaw. There seemed to be something glowing in her one visible eye, something Hazepaw couldn't quite make out. "This is my home," the spirit answered simply. Then she faced forward again and walked off into the darkness of the woods. "Until we meet again, Hazepaw."

No sooner the she-cat had vanished from sight, Hazepaw felt something nudging his side. He blinked, and the dim forest disappeared. Instead, The walls of the apprentice's den surrounded him. And Urchinpaw was there, practically in his face. His paw was extended mid reach. But when he noticed Hazepaw stir, Urchinpaw immediately pulled back.

"Good, you're up," he meowed, twitching his whiskers. "Time for patrol."

Hazepaw grumbled at the wiry black tom a little, resisting the urge to growl. But with the way Urchinpaw was looking at him, Hazepaw held back. Instead he shouldered the other tom aside to make room for him to stand. He groomed some leaf matter off his pelt before following his denmate out into the cool evening air. The sky had darkened with clouds since Hazepaw had begun his nap. The air smelled sweetly with moisture, and his paws felt damp as he padded alongside Urchinpaw across camp. It wasn't hard to tell that it had rained recently. A fine mist still sprinkled down,

making Hazepaw's fur frizz a little. But he enjoyed the sensation of it soaking into his thick pelt. It had been some time since he'd gotten to be in water, and he was starting to miss it. Even with all the rain recently, it could not quell Hazepaw's desire to swim in the salty currents of the ocean. But it was still too dangerous to return to the beach. However, the storms had started to subside within the past half moon. Maybe Oceanclan would get to move back home soon. For now, though, they were stuck patrolling the Forest Patch. Minnowjaw greeted the two young toms as they approached, sweeping his tabby tail around them to guide them forward. They met with Sandclaw--Sandybreeze's brother-- and Troutwhisker, who nodded a welcome of her own. Urchinpaw copied the older she-cat, while Hazepaw simply grunted in response. Sandclaw motioned for the other cats to follow after him as he begun to lead the way out into the damp forest. Droplets leaked down from the Newleaf growths in the canopy overhead, splashing against the Oceanclan cat's coats. Hazepaw tilted his muzzle back to allow one to fall on his face. It trickled down his features, leaving him feeling refreshed. Hazepaw sighed with content as he leveled his head, glancing to see Urchinpaw watching him fron his left side. The black tom chuckled, smiling at his denmate softly. Hazepaw caught himself smiling back, unable to withhold a chuckle of his own as his friend stumbled over a root while distracted.

"Wow, Urchinpaw, that was *real* graceful!" Hazepaw remarked sarcastically.

"Shut it," Urchinpaw growled back playfully. Hazepaw raised a paw in response, batting at the other tom. Urchinpaw growled again, tackling Hazepaw. Hazepaw laughed, rolling Urchinpaw off himself to trot farther ahead.

"Don't go too far!" Troutwhisker called as the toms went on without the rest of the patrol.

"We won't!" Urchinpaw promised. "I'll keep this stupid furball in line."

"'Keep me in line', huh?" Hazepaw parroted.

"Well some cat has to, before you go causing problems again-"

Urchinpaw then paused, holding Hazepaw back with a stuck out paw. "-Like by crossing the border without looking!"

"Huh? What are you talking about?" Hazepaw questioned. He parted his jaws to scent the air. But he only caught the murky scents of the wet forest around them. There weren't any signs of fresh markers, although Hazepaw could tell a Treeclan patrol was nearby. Urchinpaw nudged him with his shoulder. He pointed using his muzzle to a pine tree slightly off to the right. The choppy bark had claw marks carved into it. It looked as though a cat had stood up on its hind legs to scratch there.

"Good eye, Urchinpaw!" Minnowjaw complimented as he caught up with the apprentices.

"That's how Treeclan marks the border when it's too rainy to leave scents," Sandclaw explained. "By the looks of it, this was just carved."

"Maybe we can catch up with the Treeclan patrol?" Minnowjaw suggested. "Have a lil' chat?"

"I don't see any harm in it." Sandclaw shrugged, motioning for the patrol to hurry along. Minnowjaw pulled ahead, his muzzle stuck in the air as he followed the trail of Treeclan. Hazepaw moved to keep pace, Urchinpaw matching his speed.
Ahead, Hazepaw could just make out the ginger fur of a cat.

"Flamepath!"

Flamepath, the Treeclan warrior Hazepaw spotted, let out a confused trill. She looked from the tree she clawed to the approaching Oceanclan patrol with a smile.

"Ah, Minnowjaw, hello," she greeted, toucing noses with the brown tabby as the patrols came together. Her unusual blue eyes twinked at the sight of the Oceanclan warrior. Hazepaw wondered what history these cats had that made them so glad to see one another. Beside Flamepath stood a few other Treeclan cats. A fluffy black apprentice with a small tail approached Urchinpaw, a smooth flirty smile upon his face. A sturdy dark brown tom with a stoic

expression started exchaning pleasantries with Troutwhisker. And a pretty silver and white molly stood there staring moon-eyed at Hazepaw.
Hazepaw lit up like sunlight on the waves when he noticed her. *Moonpaw!* But he quickly hid his excitement with a paw. He washed his face, trying to act casual in the pretty molly's presence.

"Hey you," she mewed to him quietly.

"Oh, hey," Hazepaw deadpanned. "Didn't know you'd be here." *Be cool, Hazepaw, be cool*, he told himself.

"It's a lovely surprise, isn't it?" Moonpaw purred with a small head tilt. "It's been a while since we last met. Maybe we could..?" She trailed off into silence as she gave a glance to her clanmates. Clearly she didn't want them to figure out that she and Hazepaw had spent time together before. Or at least, she didn't want them to suspect they'd enjoyed getting to know each other outside of Gatherings.

Hazepaw smirked at her, suppressing a purr. "Yeah," he agreed. Then he stole a glance of the other cats around them before signing, "*By the Rubble Path. Tonight?*"
Moonpaw nodded in agreement. Hazepaw felt his heartbeat quickening in anticipation.

Under the veil of darkness brought by the night, Hazepaw snuck through the forest undergrowth. He ducked under bushes, and tip-toed over roots, trying his best to stay silent. Any cat that might see him would think he was hunting with how cautious he was being. Really, Hazepaw was just trying not to get caught. But it grew more difficult as he drew closer to the open beach. The plants were more scarce at the edge of the woods, and soon there was nothing to disguise Hazepaw's long white pelt from visibility. But he should be safe now, he figured. The beach was usually vacant past moonhigh. He could stroll without fear onto it, following the forest line and along the cliffside until the Rubble Path came within his view. On the rocks, Moonpaw was already waiting for him. Her ears were pricked and alert.

"Hazepaw!" She trilled out as the white tom trotted the rest of the way over to her.

"Hey," he greeted, stepping up just enough to touch noses with the Treeclan apprentice. Moonpaw purred, a soft smile on her muzzle. "How have you been?"

Upon asking, Moonpaw's smile began to faulter. "I'm well but...I could be better," she confessed.

"Did something happen?" Hazepaw wondered aloud. Moonpaw nodded, her expression shifting entirely. Her once happy demeanor became darker, and her eyes watered a little.

"My...my brother was stolen by Twolegs," she explained in a soft melancholy voice. "We've been searching on and off for a half moon. But there's no sign of him. Today, Blazestar said it was finally time to give up. That it's time to move on."

Hazepaw felt awkward, unsure of what to say after finding out such news. He'd met with Moonpaw tonight with the intent on having a fun time. He didn't realize things would become so serious, especially not upon first catching up. Maybe Sea Breeze had been right, when she said Moonpaw needed to focus on her own clan. "Oh," he murmured. "...That sucks."

"Yeah," Moonpaw sighed, trying to force herself to smile again. "It does.... But the clan will go on without him. We'll all be ok!"

"But are *you* ok?" Hazepaw found himself asking. He'd never cared how others felt before. But something compelled him to check when it came to Moonpaw. Was it because he wanted a stronger connection to her? He wasn't sure.
Moonpaw seemed taken aback by his question. Almost as much as he had for asking it. She blinked, her forced smile falling again to reveal her surprise, and her sadness. Suddenly, Moonpaw gave her head a small shake, then a harder one, before she thrust herself forward into Hazepaw. She buried her muzzle into his neck ruff and began to cry. Hazepaw almost stumbled backwards from the force of her weight against him, but steadied himself enough to support her.

"No," Moonpaw sniffled quietly in response, "I'm not."
Hazepaw hesitantly wrapped his tail around her, resting his chin on

the top of the Treeclan apprentice's head. He felt strange about the position they were in, curled up together like they'd known each other forever. But he made no comment about it, allowing the silver and white she-cat to express her feelings and have the comfort she clearly needed right now.
"I'm trying so hard to keep a brave face for my family, Hazepaw.... My mom's fallen back into depression, and I'm fighting tooth and claw to pull her back out. I have to stop my sister from going off on reckless patrols to cause problems for Grassclan. Smokepaw, my other brother, keeps disappearing to Starclan knows where when I'm distracted. Meanwhile, my dad's off sitting vigil at the Twolegplace border every day from dawn to sunhigh like some kind of loner!" Then Moonpaw pulled back to look Hazepaw in the face, her eyes wet with tears and voice wobbly with woe.
"I feel *so* alone. Even with my friends and clanmates around....I don't feel like any of them care about how I've been doing since Skunkpaw was taken. How can I hold everyone together when I'm barely holding myself in one piece...?"

Hazepaw furrowed his brows. "Hey, listen to me. That's not your responsibility. Your kin can take care of themselves. They aren't kits. You need to focus on yourself before you let others tear you apart from the inside," he meowed seriously. Hazepaw felt such a mixture of pity and genuine concern for Moonpaw that it almost made him sick. He couldn't understand how a cat could care for others to the point that it was detrimental to their own well-being. He'd never seen someone show so much compassion before. It was confusing. But Hazepaw was compelled to Moonpaw, regardless. Maybe he wanted some of that compassion in his life. Was it selfish of him? Potentially. Especially after Sea Breeze had advised him to leave Moonpaw alone. But what Hazepaw was sure of was that he wanted to be there for Moonpaw, as much as he wanted her to be there for him.
"You're a nice cat, Moonpaw. But you should work on being more selfish. There's nothing wrong with looking out for yourself, once in a while."

"I know that..." Moonpaw sighed.

"Would it make you feel better if I said you could be that way here?

With me, you can be free to be however you want. You wanna be sad, or angry? Go ahead. My fur's thick enough to soak up the tears from your eyes. And I'm tough enough for you to thrash around 'til all your frustration's gone."

Moonpaw chuckled a little, making Hazepaw's heart bubble. "And what do you get out of it?"

"Me? A new sparring partner, for starters. And...a new friend. A real friend. I've never known a cat quite like you before. But I wanna be around you more."

"I'd like that, too," she agreed.
Moonpaw moved her face closer to Hazepaw's, like he had the night they'd met up after the Gathering. She pressed her nose tenderly to his, and Hazepaw found himself enjoying her touch. He pressed against her in return, purring. After a moment or two, Moonpaw pulled back once more to look at him. She wiped a paw over her face, drying it as her true smile returned.
"Thank you," her mew almost came out as a whisper.

Hazepaw snorted in amusement, as if the molly's gratitude was funny. Really, he was just flustered and trying to hide it. "No need for that," he insisted, lifting a paw to playfully cuff her over the ear.
Moonpaw let out a trill, ducking to avoid the tom's touch. Then she feigned a growl, tossing a paw back at him in return.
The pair swatted back and forth playfully for a moment before piling onto each other. Hazepaw rolled Moonpaw around in the sand on the beach, dirtying her pretty silver and white pelt. But she didn't care. Moonpaw laughed as the tom turned them both over and over again along the silty ground. Until, finally she used her strength to put a stop to the play, forcing Hazepaw into a cuddle session. Hazepaw grumbled as Moonpaw settled him beneath herself, but purred loudly to express his joy. She washed the sediment from his face, and Hazepaw lifted his muzzle to clean her chest.
For the rest of the night, the pair spent their time curled up on the sand together like this. They shared tongues and talked, as if they'd be clanmates since birth. Hazepaw found himself wishing the night would never end. But as it always did, the sun began to peak over the horizon. It was a warning to the pair that it was time to go

home. So with a heavy heart the apprentices stood, rubbing their muzzles together one last time. They quietly promised to meet again soon, as Hazepaw walked Moonpaw back up the Rubble Path. Only when she took off into the forest did Hazepaw turn to retreat back to his part of the woods; a lightness in his step as went on his way.

Chapter 17

The sun was quickly reaching its peak in the sky, hardly visible behind a curtain of clouds. Moonpaw moved quickly through the forest's underbrush, determined to catch one more piece of prey before meeting up with her hunting patrol. A warm inviting scent drifted into her nose as she stalked along. Her favorite animal to feast upon was scurrying a bear-length ahead of her path. Its bushy tail twitched as it sat upright, sniffing the air for signs of trouble. Moonpaw ducked down, peeking through the branches of an elderberry bush to keep watch of her target. When the squirrel relaxed and went about its business, Moonpaw drew closer.
Just a fox-length away now, she told herself, settling her paws in the right position. *Stay right there...* After giving her haunches a calculated adjustment, Moonpaw shot forward, claws extended towards her prey. The squirrel bushed in surprise, jumping away just as Moonpaw landed. It scampered towards the nearest tree, the silver and white molly hot on its heels. It rounded up the trunk effortlessly. Moonpaw was just as quick, catching up to her prey in no time at all. Before it could escape to a narrow branch, she had its tail in her jaws. The fluffy rodent let of a pained squeak. Moonpaw was quick to pull the squirrel closer with a paw, nipping its spine before its cries became too pitiful. *Thank you Starclan for the food*, she prayed as she picked up her catch.

"Moonpaw!" Leafheart called from the roots of the tree.

"Coming!" Moonpaw responded, scaling down to stand beside her mentor. She dropped the squirrel at the ginger she-cat's paws, pride glowing from within her.

"Great catch," praised Leafheart with an approving blink. "Ready to go? Bluefang and Flamepaw are waiting for us by the sycamore over there." She pointed with her tail.
Moonpaw hummed agreeingly, then picked her squirrel back up. She dug up her other piece of prey on the way, carrying it with her to show off to her clanmates. Bluefang meowed a greeting as they

approached, while Flamepaw finished uncovering some prey he'd buried.

"Hey, Moon," the firey ginger tom mewed to her. "Wanna help carry some of this?"

Moonpaw put her catch down again, ears twitching. "I've kind of got my paws full with what I have," she responded with a gesture.

"Can you at least help carry the vole? It's not too big. You should be capable of carrying it with your squirrel and mouse."

"I hope you're not implying that I'm a big mouth," Moonpaw teased, knowing well that Flamepaw was being serious. He was similar to his father, Blazestar, in that regard. He didn't joke around much. The expression on his face showed just how unamused by Moonpaw's insinuation he was. That only served to make her giggle.
"Alright, alright. I'll help," she caved, pulling the vole Flamepaw had caught towards herself. She placed it beside her own prey, gathering it all in her mouth carefully. She didn't want to drop anything on the home journey.
Looking to the warriors, each had gotten their own prey to take with them. They glanced at the apprentices, beckoning them to follow the pair up into the trees. Moonpaw climbed up behind Bluefang, following his tail across the canopy as they made their way back to camp. The branches trembled as the Treeclan cats leaped from one to the next, balancing themselves carefully on the narrow path. Moonpaw watched her paws, focusing on not slipping. Nearby, she heard a mother bird land in her nest, where a trio of hungry, gaping mouthed chicks awaited her. In a tree ahead, a squirrel scurried out of the way of the oncoming warriors, fearful of being hunted. Had they not already been carrying prey, one of the patrol members might have gone after it. Instead the fuzzy rodent was free to live another day. And what a day it was. The weather was warming at last; the faintest signs of Greenleaf were beginning to show. The flower blossoms in the trees were wilting slowly and giving space for broad green leaves to unfurl. The forest was teeming with tiny creatures, born thanks to Newleaf's bounties. And although it looked like it may rain again, Moonpaw knew the clouds would clear come nightfall. There was to be a full moon

tonight, after all. Another blessing from Starclan.
Moonpaw already knew she was invited to go to tonight's Gathering. Excitement radiated from every flea-length of her pelt as she thought about it. She hoped to see Hazepaw there. In the last half moon, the pair had been meeting up almost every other night. Yet she couldn't help but miss the Oceanclan apprentice during the day. Especially because she could never be seen with him. But tonight, Moonpaw could interact with Hazepaw freely, and maybe even introduce him to some of her friends. Silently, she prayed to Starclan for the opportunity.
The low hanging branches of the Entrance Tree soon came into Moonpaw's sights. She easily picked her way down when her turn to climb arrived. Her claws fit easily into the grooves set in the tree; marks left by generations of clanmates. With a soft thud she landed in the leaf littered clearing of Treeclan's camp. A few cats meowed greetings as the hunters made their way to the fresh-kill pile. It seemed as if they were the last patrol to return home. Just in time for sharing tongues.
Moonpaw placed all of her load onto the pile, then made a b-line for the nursery. Outside, Mapleshine--the mother of the clan's youngest kits-- laid in a patch of soft grass, eyes closed contently. Beside her sat Brightsky, who groomed the younger she-cat's ear. Moonpaw purred at the sight of her own mother, trotting over to the queens with tail held high.

"Hi, Moonpaw!" Honeykit, Mapleshine's moggy kitten chirped. They hopped over to the apprentice on clumsy legs, blocking her path. Their face was bright with glee. She was acting as if it'd been moons since she'd last seen the silver and white apprentice. Moonpaw thought it was cute.

"Hi, hi!" Peonykit chimed in, following after her littermate.

"Hi kits, you're looking lively as ever!" Moonpaw greeted, lowering her head so the younger cats could nuzzle her. Then she stood upright to greet their mother, who had patiently waited to be acknowledged. It was rude not to show queens proper respect. They outranked even warriors in the clan's hierarchy. But kits were ignorant of such things. Their only focus at their young age was on themselves and their own needs. The queens seemed to take no

offense to Moonpaw greeting the kits first because of that fact.

"Hello, Mapleshine." Moonpaw nodded her head. Then she looked at the other she-cat. "And mama! It's so good to see you outside after so long." Brightsky had taken to hiding in the nursery again after Skunkpaw went missing. But she seemed to be coming around easier than she had when Rainkit had died. Perhaps it was because she knew Skunkpaw was alive somewhere.

"It feels good to be out," Brightsky admitted, blinking. "Staying in the nursery doesn't feel as good as it used to. Unless I'm around the kits. I must admit they've been very helpful the past half moon or so. And Mapleshine was gracious enough to allow to me assist with their upbringing."

"Gracious isn't the right word," Mapleshine chimed, bunting her head against Brightsky's. "I'm *grateful*! These three are such a pawful. I hardly know what I'm doing with them. But its easier raising the kits with your experience."

Brightsky purred, rasping her tongue between the other queen's ears. "Skunkpaw would probably be grateful too, I suppose. He loved your kittens as if they were his kin. I'm honored to watch over them in his absence."

"Speaking of kittens, where's Sleekkit?" Moonpaw wondered, swinging her head around in search of the black and white tom. She peered along the nursery's roots expecting to find the kit practicing his climbing skills. But he wasn't there.

"Sleekkit?" Mapleshine echoed. She twitched her nose, trying to catch her son's scent.

"Oh no," Brightsky groaned, as her attention drew towards the apprentice's tree. "Look there." She pointed with her muzzle. The other kits squealed in delight, rushing to follow their brother up the bark of the tree. Mapleshine sighed with exasperation. She rose to her paws and followed her kits in an attempt to stop them from climbing. Brightsky stood and rubbed her cheek against Moonpaw's before following her fellow queen to assist. Moonpaw purred with amusement, padding off to share tongues

with cats elsewhere. Along the way she saw Batpaw outside of the medicine den. Berrypaw was seated beside her, while Mothsong fastened some cobwebs over the molly's fresh wounds. Moonpaw wondered how Batpaw managed to get injured so often. But she decided it wasn't her place to ask. Not now, at least. But maybe Tigerpaw would know. As she continued on her way, Moonpaw made a mental note to question her best friend about it later; once they'd both finished their round of greetings through the camp.
Nearby, Moonpaw caught Darkfire spending time with her mate, Beetlenose. It was a rare sight to see two of the clan's fiercest warriors enjoying downtime. But Moonpaw supposed it was a luxury afforded to all of Treeclan's cats, thanks to their traditions. Beetlenose was attentively cleaning a cut along the bridge of Darkfire's nose. She'd clearly refused to have it treated by a medicine cat. Moonpaw guessed that the tortoiseshell molly wanted a new scar. Though, she wasn't sure how Darkfire had managed to earn the injury. As far as she knew there were no battles today. Something inside of Moonpaw told her she didn't want to know where the cut had come from. So she moved on, to avoid drawing the attention of the two seniors warriors.
By the warrior's tree, Fogpaw was wrestling with Meadowpaw, while Emberpaw cheered them on. Moonpaw decided to join in their fun, settling beside the calico molly as the other apprentices waged their brawl.

"Meadowstrike!" Emberpaw yowled with a paw raised in rally. "Teach that flea-brain not to mess with Sunclan!!"

"I'm fighting with all the strength I can," Meadowpaw called back. "Sunclan will never be beaten!" Then she tilted her head back, looking at Moonpaw upside-down. "Oh hi, Moonpaw!" She mewed from underneath her opponent. Then she lifted her muzzle to feign a killing bite to Fogpaw's throat.

"Fox-dung!" He cursed, falling over dramatically. "Moonpawww," he moaned, exaggerating the rasp of his voice, as if he were dying. He stuck out a paw in her direction with claws extended. "A..venge...meee...." his voice gurgled and died out, while he pretended to choke on his own blood. Moonpaw *mrrowed* with laughter, stepping over the apprentice's body.

"Sorry, I'm Meadowpaw's clanmate, not yours," she informed, standing beside the golden molly. Meadowpaw looked down at Fogpaw smugly. Then Fogpaw peeked open an eye to glare at them.

"You suck," he grumbled, which only made Moonpaw and the other mollies laugh once more.

Nightpaw soon padded over to the four apprentices, her expression flat and unamused. She swept her tail and held Fogpaw's gaze before addressing the whole group. "Stars, you're all a bunch of kits. When are you going to stop playing games?" Her fur was bristled, as if she'd been personally offended by their play. Her focus mainly remained on Fogpaw.

"There's nothing wrong with games," Moonpaw remarked, twitching her whiskers.

With an eyeroll, Nightpaw hissed; "There is when you're nearly a warrior, like these three mouse-brains."
Moonpaw wondered what'd gotten Nightpaw's tail in such a knot. Maybe it was because Darkfire cut Nightpaw and her littermates back from play at a young age. The thought of cats messing around might seem immature or foreign to her. But Moonpaw speculated it might be jealousy. She'd been suspicious for a while that Nightpaw harbored feelings for Fogpaw. Perhaps she was just offended to not be included in his fun.

"Things have been stressful," Fogpaw argued as he stood up. "We're under a lot of pressure. Between the border skirmishes and our upcoming assessments, we're ready to tear our fur out."
Meadowpaw and Emberpaw nodded along in agreement.
"So we're taking today to unwind."

Nightpaw twitched her whiskers, holding her gaze with his again. She took a couple steps forward, drawing closer to the gray tom. She seemed ready to start a fight. Then she paused as Meadowpaw spoke up.

"I think you could use some time to unwind too. Since you seem to have a stick stuck up your butt."
Moonpaw gasped at the remark, while Emberpaw laughed so hard

she nearly fell over. Nightpaw narrowed her eyes bitterly at the two older apprentices, a growl rising in her throat. She wanted to snap back, Moonpaw was sure, but the black molly didn't seem to have the words. Instead she lifted her nose into the air and turned away. Meadowpaw stuck her tongue out in Nightpaw's direction. Then Fogpaw looked between his peers before running after her.
After spending a short while longer with the clan's second eldest apprentices, Moonpaw made her way over to some other clanmates. She briefly spoke with Thrushmask, Shadeleaf, and Greytuft, who wanted to know how her training was going. She mewed a "hello" to Magpiepaw, Foxpaw, and Leopardpaw who were having a heated discussion. Then she moved on to greet to Tinypaw. She was sitting with her brother, Deerpaw, who was too busy washing his sister's shoulder to say hello in return. Moonpaw took no offense and simply moved on to her other clanmates.
She received a thank you from Flamepaw for her assistance earlier, just before he was bowled over by his brothers, Sunpaw and Adderpaw. The toms chased each other around the camp, taking turns throwing each other off their paws. Moonpaw was careful to avoid them as she came to settle with another group of cats. She next chose to meet with Silverhawk, who sat with her kits Violetshade, Blackpaw and Beepaw. Moonpaw played mossball with the apprentices a little, while gossiping.
Beepaw mentioned Smokepaw, and how distant he had become in the past half moon. He hadn't even come home to share tongues yet. That made Moonpaw a little nervous to find out. But just as the anxiety began to form, her brother came rushing down the Entrance Tree, as if on cue. Wolfheart was not far behind. Smokepaw had a young rabbit in his jaws; an impressive enough catch to keep cats from questioning his whereabouts. Instead, clanmates mewed praise at him as the smoke tom dragged his prey to the fresh-kill pile. Meanwhile they whispered judgementally as Wolfheart passed by. Moonpaw sighed with relief, then finished her game with her friends before visiting her kin.

"Smokepaw! Papa!" She called as she strolled over to them. "Where have you been?"

"Just....out in the forest," Smokepaw answered as he stood upright. His pelt was a bit ruffled. It was clear he was nervous, and probably

lying through his teeth. Moonpaw looked to her father instead, searching for a more honest answer.

"He was with me," Wolfheart added. Moonpaw arched her brow suspiciously. She knew he father had been traveling to the Twolegplace recently. She understood it was because he was hoping to spot Skunkpaw. Had he recruited Smokepaw to help with the search in secret? But then, why would he confess to Moonpaw?

"You were both at Twolegplace?" Moonpaw questioned, quietly so as not to be overhead by others. Smokepaw bristled more. He lowered his ears as he looked towards their father. He seemed to be more flustered than upset at being caught. *How odd*, Moonpaw thought.

"I was dragging this furball away from causing trouble," Wolfheart explained further.
Moonpaw tilted her head in confusion. *Smokepaw? Causing trouble?* That seemed very unlikely. He was the sort to stop trouble, not cause it!
"Go on. Tell her what you've been up to," the gray and white warrior demanded.

"Papa!" Smokepaw hissed, arching his back in surprise and betrayal. Then he sighed and slowly relaxed his body. He glanced around them with head lowered, before mumbling out an explanation.
"Alright. It's true, I was in the Twolegplace," the smokey tom began to explain. "I've...I've been seeing Oliver."

"That kittypet who assisted our search party last moon?" Moonpaw checked, not sure if she correctly understood what he was implying.

Smokepaw nodded, licking his chest fur down. "He's not so bad. I...like spending time with him."
Moonpaw perked her ears at the softness in her brother's tone. She could practically feel the heat radiating from his pelt. *Does Smokepaw have a crush on a kittypet?* Moonpaw wondered. A smile bloomed on her muzzle as she thought about it. Then she moved without thinking, bumping her forehead against Smokepaw's.

"That's cute," she mewed. "Don't worry, Smokey, I won't tell anyone

your secret." Moonpaw pulled back to look her brother in the eye. She wanted him to know how serious she was. She had a secret friend, too, whom she didn't want any cat to find out about. She knew what her brother was going through. And Moonpaw was more than willing to support him, even if he didn't exactly understand why. But he appeared grateful, smiling and purring at her for her positive reaction. One cat, however, wasn't as positive about Smokepaw's new alliance.

"You should be careful. Cross border relationships are risky." Wolfheart spoke with a wisdom to his tone, as if his advice came from personal experience. Had Moonpaw's father had feelings for a cat outside their clan in his youth? Moonpaw couldn't help but wonder. But the possibility quickly seemed ludicrous. According to both Brightsky and Wolfheart, the pair had been in love since their apprenticeship. There wouldn't have been any time for Wolfheart to catch feelings for another cat. So perhaps Wolfheart spoke from witnessing the experiences of others. Or maybe Moonpaw was looking too deeply into things, and Wolfheart was simply speaking out of fatherly concern. She wasn't sure, nor did Moonpaw want to press the issue. Instead she nuzzled her brother, then moved to nuzzle her dad, before letting both toms run off to share tongues with their clanmates before it was too late in the day.

Moonpaw finally made her way back to the fresh-kill pile, her belly rumbling eagerly. She picked out two mice, and set off into the crowded clearing again, this time in search of Tigerpaw. The she-cat's tabby and white pelt was easy to pick out in the patch of sunlight that managed to sneak through the clouds. She was close to the Great Stump, already expecting a visit from her best friend.

"Alright, Moomoo!" She cheered. "You remembered your promise!"

"Of course I did, silly," Moonpaw purred as she settled beside her friend. She placed one mouse at Tigerpaw's paws, then set the other between her own. "I never miss an opportunity to eat with you."

"Well what about the other evening?" Tigerpaw countered as she began to chew a chunk off her meal. "You left to go 'clear your head' in the forest instead of having dinner with me."

That was one of the nights Moonpaw left to meet with Hazepaw, she remembered. But Tigerpaw had been running late coming home from a patrol. She'd been involved in a border skirmish with Oceanclan. Then Mothsong held her up even longer in the medicine den, to patch up her wounds. It was neither of their fault that their schedules hadn't aligned. But Moonpaw couldn't tell Tigerpaw that. So she'd lied about having another rough day training with Leafheart, to make it seem as though she needed space. Moonpaw hated acting that way. Especially when it came to time spent with Tigerpaw. But Moonpaw saw Tigerpaw far more often than Hazepaw. So she didn't mind putting some distance between them every once in a while. But when Tigerpaw brought it up the way she was now, Moonpaw couldn't stop herself from feeling guilty.

"I'm sorry, Tig," she apologized genuinely. "You know I don't like leaving you behind like that."

"Yeah yeah, I know, you were having a rough day. But so was I!"

"But I'm here now," Moonpaw gently reminded her, which helped Tigerpaw calm down.

"You're right," she agreed through a mouthful of food.
The pair sat in silence for a while, eating their mice until every last bite of meat was consumed. Moonpaw enjoyed the quiet that had settled between them, for a change. It gave her some time to think and relax. She hadn't gotten a chance to do so since waking up this morning. And with the Gathering coming up shortly, Moonpaw would be on the go and chatting again the whole night long. So the brief moment of calm was welcomed. Tigerpaw, too, seemed to be enjoying the peace. Starclan knew she deserved it. She was constantly put on battle patrols to face against Oceanclan, unlike Moonpaw. And she had the extra the pressure to preform well in everything she did, thanks to being Blazestar's apprentice. So Moonpaw was glad to give her best friend this moment; a moment to just exist and not preform.
After licking clean the bones of their meal, Moonpaw and Tigerpaw moved closer together to share tongues. Moonpaw washed Tigerpaw's neck, while Tigerpaw groomed her cheeks. The tabby she-cat spoke of a recent battle she had participated in, while Moonpaw shared the news of her mother's recovery from

depression. Then the topic shifted to other things. Gossip, newly learned lessons, and jokes.
Around them the clan began to shift, as the end of sunhigh came. Thornberry walked across the clearing, gathering up cats to start sorting the next set of patrols. Some mentors called for their apprentices to go out for training. The rest of the clan parted ways to continue with whatever other duties they had to attend to. Blazestar summoned some of his senior warriors beneath the Great Stump, prompting Moonpaw and Tigerpaw to go elsewhere so they would not be able to easedrop on the meeting. Then Tigerpaw was pulled away by Galestorm, to battle practice with Beepaw at the tree dome. That left Moonpaw all alone to mentally prepare for the journey she'd be taking tonight. For the last part of the day, she decided visiting the elders would be best. So, Moonpaw stood with a stretch and made her way over to the pile of moss covered branches, ducking inside to spend some much needed time with her elder friend.
Time seemed to fly after entering. She only got to hear three stories before Blazestar summoned his gathering party over to the Entrance Tree. Moonpaw followed Badgerface's tail out to join their clanmates, both being lucky enough to attend the full moon meeting. Today had been eventful already. Moonpaw wondered what more had happened throughout the Land's Star. With an excited twitch of her pelt, Moonpaw followed her clanmates out of camp to find out.

Chapter 18

The moon was nearly at its peak in the sky by the time Treeclan reached the Gathering Clearing. At the front of the chosen cats, Blazestar stood, with a stern expression fixed on his face. Clearly he had something on his mind, something he'd soon come to make everyone else's problem too. Moonpaw wasn't too far from him, seeing the anger blazing in his eyes as the orange tom turned to dismiss his clan. Moonpaw crouched a little as she passed him, not wanting to be caught in his path and bother him. She followed the tail of her elder friend, Badgerface, moving up to his side to match pace with him as he mixed into the crowd.

"So what happened to the Moon after the argument with the ocean? I have to know!" Moonpaw insisted, wanting Badgerface to continue a story he'd been telling on the way to the Gathering.

"Ah. Well, you see..." the elder started as they walked.
Moonpaw nodded along to the old tom's words, searching the clearing with her eyes as they padded along. Slowly, Badgerface's fable faded into background noise. Soon, Moonpaw realized she'd drowned it out entirely. She was too occupied looking for Hazepaw to focus. She was eager for the white tom to pop out and surprise her-like he'd done at the last full moon meeting. Though many white pelts mingled through the clearing, none belonged to her dear friend. Disappointment began to worm its way into Moonpaw's chest. It must have shown on her face, too, as Badgerface gave pause.

"Moon, I think you should go mingle with some cats your own age now," he meowed, resting his tail on her back.
A pang of guilt suddenly gripped Moonpaw. She parted her jaws, ready to apologize for losing interest in the elder's story. Then the crackly *mrrrp* of another cat split through the air. A trio of old warriors appeared a bear-length ahead. *Oh*, perhaps it wasn't her sullen expression that had made Badgerface stop speaking. Instead, the arrival of his friends must have prompted him to set the task

aside, for now. A golden tom, a long haired spotted molly, and a white mangled faced tom trotted up to Badgerface. Moonpaw looked at them in awe as they greeted her elder friend. Their pelts were littered with scars, which spoke of battles Moonpaw would love to hear tales of.
Badgerface laughed with sarcasm as one of the elders quipped at him. Something about bothering young apprentices with helping him get around in his old age. Then Badgerface moved to cuff the old she-cat over the ears. Afterwards, he pushed the golden tom to the ground playfully, displaying how capable and strong he still was as a counter-argument. The scarred white tom simply shook his head with a smile at the display.
Moonpaw *mrrowed* with laughter as she watched the old cats tussling as though they were kits. It made her heart feel warm to see them so lively, even at their age. But it was clear Moonpaw wouldn't fit in with this group, so she allowed Badgerface to go on ahead without her.
Moonpaw's gaze flitted over the throng of cats, still looking for that familiar pelt. One did emerge, but it didn't belong to Hazepaw. Instead it was Deerpaw, Tigerpaw's brother. He looked a little skittish with enemy warriors pressed around him on all sides. Despite being a moon older than Moonpaw, this was Deerpaw's first Gathering. He'd been too nervous to attend his first few. But he swore he could handle going this time around. Moonpaw could practically smell his fear. Clearly, Deerpaw had lied. It was sad to see him in such a state. So Moonpaw made her presence known to him, gently pressing her flank to his. Though he jolted a little, the tom instantly relaxed, realizing a clanmate had come to his aid. Moonpaw urged him to follow her to a less crowded part of the clearing, where he could feel more secure. Upon receiving the space he so desperately craved, Deerpaw heaved a sigh. He sat back on his haunches, then looked to Moonpaw almost teary eyed.

"Thanks," he murmured before wrapping his fluffy tail around himself.

"It's no trouble." Moonpaw twitched her ears. "Are you sure you were ready to be here tonight, chipmunk? You know you could always go home."

Deerpaw lowered his ears. "Don't want to..."
Moonpaw tilted her head curiously. Deerpaw looked as though he were ready to pass out with so many strangers around. Why did he push himself to deal with such anxiety?
"I'm too grown to be scared of Gatherings. That's what Tinypaw said. I want to be braver, to make her proud," Deerpaw elaborated.
Moonpaw nodded, understanding his choice now. Tinypaw was his favorite littermate. It made sense he'd want to face his fear for her. Especially so they could enjoy Gatherings together, like tonight.

"Deerpaw!"

Moonpaw swung around when she heard the high pitched mew of the pale tortoiseshell molly. Tinypaw came bounding over to them. Relief washed over her features when she saw her brother safe. Her tail raised in greetings as she got closer.

"There you are! I was starting to worry about you." Tinypaw rubbed her muzzle against Deerpaw's. Then she turned to Moonpaw. "Thanks for guiding him from the crowd. I'm sure the stupid furball was getting overwhelmed by the amount of cats around."

"...don't like strangers..." Deerpaw pouted and slumped his shoulders. Tinypaw moved closer to him, licking the tom over the ears. She was exactly his height, when he was sitting.

"It really was no trouble," Moonpaw assured with a tail sway, left ignored as Tinypaw fussed over her brother. Though she wished to carry on a conversation with her denmates-perhaps to distract herself from looking for Hazepaw more-it was clear she wouldn't get much out of the pair. After trying and failing again to catch Tinypaw's attention, Moonpaw padded back into the crowd.
She mewed small *"hellos"* to cats she passed as she went back to searching for Hazepaw. Along the way she walked by Nightpaw, who was standing beside Wolfheart. Moonpaw's father was boasting about the apprentice to some of his friends, praising her quick wit and skills. Nightpaw was practically glowing with pride as her mentor spoke of her accomplishments. She looked up to him, it seemed, as she added in how good Wolfheart was as a teacher. Moonpaw had never seen the she-cat so happy before.
Not far away, Nightpaw's mother, Darkfire, was standing beside two

other tough looking warriors. Her claws were unsheathed as she told them about a recent Oceanclan skirmish she'd helped win. A close by sand speckled warrior had his eyes narrowed at her, clearly agitated by her recount of the event.
There were others from Moonpaw's clan nearby as well, and cats she recognized from patrols and the previous Gathering. But none of them were Hazepaw. For a short while more, Moonpaw continued looking for him. But it did not seem like he was present tonight. Defeat weighed down Moonpaw's heart like a heavy stone. *He promised he'd make it to the Gathering. Has something happened?* She wondered.
Moonpaw paused to look at Split Rock. Four of the five leaders were present atop the ancient cracked boulder. They'd be calling the gathered cats together soon, for sure. It looked like they were waiting for Brightstar to arrive. Moonpaw supposed she could wait in her place alone until the announcements began. It was a good spot to listen and be out of everyone's way. Then, someone called out to her;

"Hi, Moonpaw!"

For a heartbeat she perked up, turning around to see who'd called. Yet disappointment greeted her again as Sunpaw stood in front of her.

"Oh, Hi Sunny." Moonpaw deflated.

"You look a little down." Sunpaw blinked. Moonpaw gave a shrug. "Is it because you're lonely? I could keep you company, if you'd like?"
Moonpaw thought for a heartbeat. Though she'd like to stay where she was, in case Hazepaw finally decided to show his face, she had to admit she was feeling lonesome. Perhaps spending time with Sunpaw could cheer her up.

"I would like that, actually," she admitted.

Sunpaw lit up. "Great!" He made a small hop. "Come with me!" Before Moonpaw could say anything about going elsewhere, Sunpaw was leading her through the crowd.
Near a fallen branch, a few other cats appeared to be waiting for

them. Moonpaw glanced at Sunpaw, confused. He seemed excited to meet with these other cats, his tail held high as he led her towards them.

"Hi everyone!" He chirped.

"There you are, Sunpaw!" Purred a longhaired tabby with the scent of the mountains on her pelt. Beside her sat two Oceanclan mollies, with sand dusted fur. Sitting opposite of them was a young muddy Marshclan warrior. And next to her were two slender Grassclan she-cats. They all mewed various greetings to Sunpaw, a couple stepping up to touch noses with him. *Gee, Sunpaw's really popular with she-cats*, Moonpaw discovered as she observed his group of friends.

"'Bout time you showed up," grunted the only tom of the group, sitting off to the sidelines. Moonpaw couldn't pull her gaze from him once she looked over. Something about the tom seemed familiar to her. When she sniffed, his scent brought her an odd sense of nostalgia; the same way thinking about Skunkpaw or Rainkit did. But that was silly! How could she feel that way about a cat she'd never met? Was it a crush? Certainly not! But Moonpaw's head felt fuzzy the more she stared at the stranger. It was as if she'd met him before; like the tom had come from a dream. But Moonpaw was sure she'd never seen him until now.

"I found my clanmate sitting by herself. Otherwise I would have been here sooner." Sunpaw's voice drew Moonpaw out of her thoughts. Then his head tilted in her direction. "Everyone, this is Moonpaw. Moonpaw, this is Pinepaw of Mountainclan, Stemflower of Marshclan, Otterpaw and Whisperpaw of Oceanclan, and Heatherpaw, Quailpaw, and Rabbitpaw of Grassclan," he introduced, pointing his muzzle to each named cat.

Moonpaw nodded her head respectfully to them. "It's nice to meet you all."

"So you are the fated moon spoken of so often." Whisperpaw stared, her voice hushed and monotone. It was almost eerie, the way that she spoke.

"Does Sunpaw talk about me..?" Moonpaw blinked curiously, the fur on the back of her neck rising slightly.

"Sometimes he doesn't shut up about you," Rabbitpaw snorted. Sunpaw's pelt bristled at the lynx point tom's comment. While Heatherpaw jabbed her denmate in the side with her elbow to be quiet. Moonpaw looked to Sunpaw, seeking an explanation. But he refused to give one, instead opting to lick down his chest fur. It was if he were trying to wash away the flustered feelings he was experiencing. Moonpaw resisted the urge to giggle.

"Anyways! Uhm, last time we met up, Stemflower was telling us about what it's like to be a warrior," Sunpaw mentioned, trying to change the subject.

"That's right." Stemflower flicked an ear, motioning to Rabbitpaw. "Rabbitpaw said he was interested in the duties I've taken up. I chose to be a Spy and a Gardener."

"What's a Gardener?" Quailpaw, a light brown tabby molly asked.

"They grow plants on the dry land Mountainclan gave to Marshclan, in the pine tree forest," Pinepaw explained.

"I've never heard of such a job." Rabbitpaw swayed his tail.

"Us either," Moonpaw added while Sunpaw nodded in agreement.

"I don't think the other clans are taught what Gardeners are. Considering they aren't needed out on the meadow, or in the forest," Stemflower told Pinepaw.

"Why do Gardeners grow plants?" Sunpaw wondered.

"For our medicine cats, mostly," the dark gray tabby she-cat responded. "Some herbs have a difficult time growing in the marsh. So we need to cultivate them ourselves. We also like to have plants for our dens; for construction and decoration. And we occasionally like to mix herbs in with our prey."

"Mixing herbs with prey?" Otterpaw wrinkled her nose.

Nasty! Moonpaw stuck out her tongue. She could almost taste the bitterness of the plants as she thought about having to eat them with her meals.

"Herbs can have nutritional value, besides those for healing," Rabbitpaw spoke up, "or so my sister, Mistypaw, says. So I guess cats are told to eat them to help make Marshclan's warriors stronger, right?"

Stemflower purred, looking amused. "Something like that. The plants we eat also happen to taste good with the prey we catch. Brightstar isn't ordering us to take herbs so we can be stronger than normal warriors, in case that's what you're implying."
Speaking of the Marshclan leader, Moonpaw began to scent the strong odor of mud and saltwater beside her, as the flame point she-cat walked passed. Her shoulder brushed against Moonpaw's accidentally, catching the Treeclan apprentice's attention. Brightstar turned for a heartbeat and flashed an apologetic smile.

"Sorry, 'Paw, didn't mean to bother you. Just have to get past to start the meeting!"

Moonpaw smiled and stepped aside. "It's alright! I understand." It was almost awe-striking to interact with a clan leader besides her own. Most leaders would not mingle among the crowd for long after arriving at the Gathering clearing. But Brightstar seemed different. Though her clan was usually on time, she was almost always late to join her peers on Split Rock, it seemed. Moonpaw supposed she liked to spend time with her outer clan friends first. Or perhaps she liked meeting random cats, the way she was right now.

"It's an honor to meet you, Brightstar!" Moonpaw couldn't help but blurt out.
Brightstar blinked, then let out a small mrrow of laughter. She flicked her tail with good nature, receiving a respectful head dip from Moonpaw in return. The other apprentices with her mimicked her motion. Moonpaw noticed her new friends looking just as excited as she felt when meeting Brightstar.
Stemflower, on the other paw, nodded curtly to her leader, who brushed her tail along the warrior's shoulder. Then the Marshclan leader scurried off, taking her place beside Blazestar and the others.

"Let the Gathering begin!" Fogstar declared, looking down at the cats who gathered beneath Split Rock. Moonpaw made herself comfortable in a spot beside her new companions, tilting her head back to listen to the news of the evening. Sunpaw settled himself at her side, pressing their flanks together while they listened for news. Fogstar glanced between the other leaders seated beside him. They nodded, granting him the opportunity to speak first, once the crowd settled.

"Welcome, everyone," he greeted, sounding as though he were in a better mood this moon than the last. "I come with much to report from Mountainclan. Firstly, my son, Darkpaw, has been accepted by Starclan, and will be training under Hawkfern as a medicine cat. Meanwhile our Code Keeper, Rockfall, has taken on Skypaw as his successor. Mountainclan welcomes these new apprentices, and hope Starclan will guide their paws on their journeys to become high ranking members of society." A pause was given so cats may call out the names of Darkpaw and Skypaw in celebration. Then, as silence returned, Fogstar continued; "Secondly, one of our warriors, Briarleaf, will be moving into the nursery after tonight. Her kits should come as Greenleaf arrives, and we are thrilled to welcome them into our ranks. Finally, Talonstrike has chosen to retire. He has served Mountainclan as a warrior for many years, and we are honored to care for him now, as he has cared for us. That is all I have to share this evening. Brightstar?"

Next, Brightstar stepped up to speak. "Marshclan also has big news to share, although not as joyus as yours, Fogstar. Coyotes have been spotted on the marsh. They're usually careful around clan cats. But this new bunch seems to be more tenacious than other families we've seen." Brightstar gave a moment of pause to allow cats to quiet down their murmurs of concern. "They also appear to be seeking territory to claim. My warriors have been doing their best to drive them out, so they will not stake claim on our land. But I believe this may push these beasts onto other territories in the Land's Star. So I urge you all to be cautious." Then Brightstar turned to the other leaders. Her expression shone with regret. But none of her peers seemed too upset by what she'd determined best for her clan.

"Which clan are they headed towards?" Blazestar decided to ask, his expression calmer than the other leaders'. Treeclan was the furthest from Marshclan. Moonpaw was certain that Blazestar was unbothered by the news of these unusual predators. Still, he seemed to care enough about the wellbeing of others to ask that question anyways.

"They'll likely turn to Mountainclan territory. With the upcoming warm weather, they'll probaby enjoy the cool air the higher altitude provides," the flame point she-cat answered

Fogstar grunted. "In that case, Mountainclan will increase it's border patrols."
Another murmur broke out among the crowd. Moonpaw glanced between all the cats around her, gauging their reactions. Not too far off she saw Nightpaw. Her eyes were narrowed with interest, ears pricked and eager to hear more about the coyotes. Moonpaw then looked beside her to Sunpaw, who seemed to also have noticed their clanmate. He looked concerned for a heartbeat. Then he blinked and his expression settled. Moonpaw decided she'd ask him his thoughts later.

Brightstar nodded. "Beyond that startling news, Marshclan has fared well this moon. Prey has increased, our clan is strong, and we look forward to Greenleaf. That's all I have to report."

Following her, Blazestar stepped up to share whatever had been bothering him all night. "Treeclan is strong and continues to thrive as Greenleaf makes it approach. Though last moon we lost Skunkpaw, one of our apprentices. Twolegs kitnapped him. Our efforts to bring him home have yielded no results, but Treeclan remains hardy in the face of this tragedy. We've also been handling the pressures at our borders with diligence, and will continue to do so as long as Grassclan and Oceanclan keep pushing."

"What do you mean by that?" Oceanclan's leader, Wavestar, challenged. Whitestar of Grassclan nodded along.

With a tail lash, the blazing orange leader continued; "Grassclan and Oceanclan scents have been caught beyond our borders. The stench of Grassclan has come particularly far into the forest. While

Oceanclan remains close enough to the edge that they seem to be trying to act sneaky, still. But rest assured, my warriors are aware of your trespassing."
Dread struck through Moonpaw like lightning. Had some of her clanmates caught Hazepaw's scent on the Rubble Path from their meetings? Had they noticed hers there as well? Moonpaw's heartbeat quickened. She looked up to Blazestar, checking if he was eyeing her. But his focus was being held up by the enemy leaders instead. *We'll have to be more careful from now on*, she decided. Sunpaw pressed into her more, sensing her discomfort.

"It's rich of you to accuse my cats of trespassing." Whitestar's ears narrowed. "Have you seen any of my warriors on your land? No? Because we've certainly seen yours on our territory! A warrior caught a Treeclan apprentice prowling around the Forest Patch without cause, just today!"
Gasping, Moonpaw whipped her head, looking around for her denmates. Sunpaw was of course the first apprentice she saw. His pelt was bristled and he shook his head at her, silently swearing he was not the guilty cat. Next, Moonpaw looked over at Nightpaw. The black she-cat appeared unbothered, busying herself whispering with Wolfheart. Then, Moonpaw spotted Tinypaw and Deerpaw in the distance--right where she'd left them earlier. Tinypaw was standing protectively in front of her brother; her body too small to act as a proper shield. Closer-by was Magpiepaw, who sat with some of her own cross clan friends. She was crouched, ears lowered a little. She looked frightened, guilty even. Was it her? Moonpaw wondered, finally returning her attention back to the leaders.

"There were other Treeclan cats with her," Whitestar continued, "all fully grown warriors. What do you have to say about that, Blazestar?"

Fury burned in Blazestar orange eyes. He grit his teeth, clearly holding back a growl. Then he shut his eyes, lowering his head a little with a slow shake. When he looked up again, he seemed calmer. "My warriors were only carrying out their duty to mark the border, nothing more. I will speak with all of Treeclan's apprentices, to ensure no border crossing occurs again. But I will not correct the cats who knew what they were doing."

"So you admit that you sent your cats to mark further into the Forest Patch than they should?" Though Whitestar's voice was calm, it held sharp accusation.

"I've said no such thing!" Blazestar snarled. "My warriors know where Treeclan's territory is!"

With an indignant hrrumph, Grassclan's leader lifted a paw to lick. "See to it that they know what land rightfully belongs to Grassclan, as well. Or we will be forced to remind them ourselves." After glaring at Blazestar a heartbeat more, Whitestar faced the crowd. "Grassclan is and will remain strong despite the adversity. We have Cricketsong's newly named kits, who are quickly growing each day. We also have many strong apprentices; two of which will soon join us as full warriors. That is all I have to say this Gathering. Unless you've something else to accuse my clan of, Blazestar?"

Blazestar bared his teeth but bit back his tongue. He forced himself to sit further back onto his piece on Split Rock. Then he tucked his paws beneath his waggling tail. "No," he finally growled.

Wavestar stepped forward. "Then I suppose I should speak my news," he decided. "Oceanclan is doing better, now that the Newleaf storms are subsiding. We've begun venturing back to the beach. We are also reconstructing our original camp, which was wrecked by the waves in the bad weather. I believe within the next moon, Oceanclan should be moving back to the Twoleg Settlement Bridge. That should bring you some peace of mind, Blazestar."

"I'll have peace of mind when your clan stops fighting for the Rubble Path," the ginger tom hissed.

"I won't promise anything," Wavestar grunted.
Blazestar snarled at him in turn, moving to get in the silver and white tabby's face. But Brightstar butted in, piping;

"It seems that's everything that needs to be said at this Gathering!"

"Yes," Fogstar agreed, "let's end this now, before you lot break the full moon truce."
Though the two toms appeared ready to continue their quarrel, they

agreed. With a nod, the leaders went their separate ways, weaving through the crowd to gather their warriors.

Sunpaw and Moonpaw took a short while to say farewell to their friends group before following each other to the edge of the clearing, seating themselves at Blazestar's side. Blazestar paused for a moment to rub against his son before calling to his gathered cats. He led them out of the Gathering Clearing and into the forest, but not before shooting a challenging glare over his shoulder towards Oceanclan. Moonpaw knew that tensions were high. But she hoped that things settled soon.

Chapter 19

Silver claws glinted in strange dark light as they came swiping down to strike their target. Quick as an eel, Hazepaw moved aside to dodge the oncoming attack. He panted, narrowing his eyes at his opponent as she charged towards him again, a vicious growl rising from her throat. Though she'd missed this time, Sea Breeze was determined to pounce on the young tom. Hazepaw was doing well holding his own against her, but internally he had to admit he was struggling.

Over the past half moon, Hazepaw had come to know Sea Breeze as wise beyond the seasons--his and even her own. But he'd also come to know her as vicious, and ruthless when she wanted to be. Her bite was always sharp, despite this being practice. And her claws pierced deeply, despite her assurance to not cause him great harm. The ancient spirit could pick up on his moves almost as soon as Hazepaw planned them. She always gave him a good thrashing. It was far different than any training Hazepaw received from Sandybreeze and the other mentors while he was awake. But he was enjoying it. Practice had never been so exhilarating before. It would be more enjoyable, however, if Hazepaw were able to get a hit on Sea Breeze in return, instead of getting his tail handed to him. But Hazepaw was stubborn and determined, meeting Sea Breeze's pounce with a slash of claws. Sea Breeze jerked her head away in time to evade the blow, still managing to land perfectly on top of the fluffy white tom. She used her size to her advantage, forcing Hazepaw's legs to start buckling under her strength.

You have to toughen up to the sensation of pain, Sea Breeze had told him at the start of their lessons together. *Pain is only weakness leaving the body*, Hazepaw reminded himself as he grit his teeth over the sensation of Sea Breeze biting into his scruff. *A strong body makes a strong mind*, he shook himself, trying to throw the ancient cat off his back. *And a strong mind leads a strong clan*. But Sea Breeze took her paw, slamming it against Hazepaw's scull. She forced his head into the dark soil below them, pushing him into surrender. After letting out a pained hack, Sea Breeze relented, allowing her apprentice to be set free.

"You're getting better," she started, lifting a paw to clean her claws, "but you're still too weak. And on top of that, you're distracted."

"Distracted? I'm only focused on the lessons you've given!" Hazepaw bristled.

Sea Breeze gave him a look with her one visible eye. "Trouble, you've got a lot more on your mind than just the lessons I've been givin' you."
Hazepaw felt heat rise to his pelt, but he refused to admit Sea Breeze might be onto something. Though he tried his best to only think about his training while here in Sea Breeze's forest, he couldn't help but let his mind wander. Most often it traveled to thoughts of Moonpaw. Hazepaw had been visiting her a lot lately; every other night in fact. Tonight they were supposed to see each other at the Gathering. And though Hazepaw had been invited to go, he declined so he could stay home and train with Sea Breeze during sleep. She'd been accusing him of slacking on training, just as she accused him of distraction now. And though she was right, Hazepaw didn't dare give her the satisfaction of knowing.
"It's that Treeclan apprentice again, right?" Sea Breeze guessed.

Hazepaw flinched. "So? Am I not allowed to think about my friends anymore? Didn't realize when I agreed to train with you that I was agreeing to having you act like my mother."

Sea Breeze sighed, shaking her head slowly. Was it in disappointment? Hazepaw wondered. "You really need to stop seeing Moonpaw. She's an outsider, and you need to keep your mind centered on things going on within your own clan."

"Being with an outsider isn't seen as a bad thing in Oceanclan, though. In fact we *like* outsiders!" It almost pained Hazepaw to speak those words; the moons of lessons from his mother about the inferiority of outsiders still rung clear in his mind. But his heart told him that maybe those teachings were wrong. At least, enough to justify spending time with Moonpaw.

"Believe me, boy, I'm fully aware of what Oceanclan likes. Doesn't mean it's going to do you any favors, sneakin' around behind your clan's back. You're trying to make yourself into the best candidate

for deputy, aren't you? Deputies focus on what's best for their clan. And what Oceanclan needs is strong warrior blood. Why don't you try chasing the tail of a cat like Urchinpaw?"

"That ugly halfclan rat?" Hazepaw spit, wrinkling his nose. "I'd rather choke on seaweed!"

"So I take it you haven't got a thing for halfclanners?" Sea Breeze's voice was almost sarcastic.

Hazepaw forced his fur to lay flat."It's not about that. I just don't like toms. *Especially* not Urchinpaw!"

The old spirit twitched her whiskers. "Wow what a great way to talk about your friend!" She laughed.

"I-I can still be his friend and think he's uglier than a stonefish! A cat's looks have nothing to do with the friends they keep."

"But the friends you keep say a lot about yourself. If you surround yourself with ugly cats, what's that say about you?"

Hazepaw growled. "You callin' me ugly, you old sea hag?"

"No I just like to rile you up." Sea Breeze lifted her paw, rubbing it against the top of his head roughly, yet playful. "But back to my point.
Tensions between Oceanclan and Treeclan are high right now. You could bring worse danger to the clan if you're not careful. You need to let Moonpaw go. Why not start padding after a cat within your own borders? Stonepaw and Whisperpaw have connections to Wavestar. And Otterpaw's proven herself to be strong, formidable, and highly loyal to the clan, despite her origins."

Hazepaw parted his jaws to counter, but shut them again just as quick. Sea Breeze did have a point. With some cat like Stonepaw, Otterpaw, or Whisperpaw at his side, he'd appear as a better candidate for deputy. Being with an Oceanclan cat would prove his loyalty and dedication, especially if he helped provide the clan with kits. But Hazepaw didn't want those things, at least not now. *Not with them*. Heat rose again in Hazepaw's fur as his mind briefly

entertained the thought of having something like that with Moonpaw. Then, Sea Breeze cut in;

"You seein' reason now?"

"Huh? Oh, uh, yeah I'll... think about it in the morning, maybe," he murmured then shook his head. "Do we have to talk about my potential love life for the rest of tonight, or are we going to get back to sparring?"

With a smirk, Sea Breeze responded; "Sure, Trouble, let's get back to it." Then she grabbed him by the scruff again and threw him halfway across their training clearing. Hazepaw yowled in surprise, twisting to land on his paws. *No fair!* He wanted to exclaim, but kept silent as he lowered his head and rushed back to his opponent. Sea Breeze was ready and waiting for him, standing up onto her hind legs to catch him when Hazepaw came back into range. Hazepaw leaped up to match her, slamming his body into hers to knock the ancient spirit down. The two wrestled aggressively on the foggy floor, fur flying everywhere. Hazepaw flinched as he felt Sea Breeze's teeth sink deep into his front forepaw, preventing him from swiping at her. In an effort to free himself, the white tom instead used his back paws to claw Sea Breeze's underside. The silver tabby she-cat growled and bit harder into her opponent, blood seeping from her mouth. Hazepaw gasped at the pain and yowled out, shutting his eyes tightly. With a good kick of his rear paw, he managed to hit Sea Breeze right in her ribcage.
Sea Breeze wheezed, the wind knocked out of her. Her jaws parted for air, relinquishing Hazepaw from her grip. Hazepaw worked fast to clean his bloodied forepaw, before striking Sea Breeze again. This time he managed a good hit, smacking her right in the muzzle. Blood seeped from the scratches and Hazepaw admired his handiwork. An excited smile pulled at his lips, adrenaline coursing through his veins. He threw himself upon Sea Breeze, snatching her up by her scruff
Sea Breeze suddenly went limp below him. Just as Hazepaw moved to release her, though, she tensed up again. With a hard roll, the ancient spirit managed to throw Hazepaw onto the soil again, crushing him. She pressed one paw into his cheek, another to his shoulder. One back paw held down his belly, and the last kept his

hind legs in place. With exposed claws, the rival she-cat dug into her catch, causing Hazepaw to cry out in pain.

"If you are going to defeat an enemy," she growled, "make sure they *stay* down." Sea Breeze pressed her claws harder into the fluffy tom beneath her.
Tears welled in the corner of Hazepaw's eyes, the stinging pain of Sea Breeze's dirty claws too much to bear.

"Let me go!" He yowled. "I get it! I get it! I won't be so soft anymore!" He promised, trying so hard to wiggle free. But it was no use. Sea Breeze's hold was too great. Even when Hazepaw let his body go limp she did not let go. Instead, she scratched his shoulder, taking pleasure in her dream apprentice's pain. Hazepaw cried out again, thrashing himself harder than before.

"Let go! Let me go!!" He pleaded, squeezing shut his eyes.
Then he felt himself being shaken violently, as if Sea Breeze were desperate to rile him up some more.
"I said *stop*!" Hazepaw yowled once more. But when he moved, he was astonished to feel the weight on his back had suddenly disappeared.

"Hazepaw!"
A familiar voice called.
Hazepaw's eyes shot open, revealing not the foggy dream forest surrounding him, but the walls of the apprentice's den. Blinking to compose himself, Hazepaw gave a cautious glance around. Stonepaw was standing in front of him; her expression annoyed but relieved. Hazepaw quickly sat up as he noticed her, a twinge of pain shooting throughout his body as he moved. *No way...* Hazepaw turned to examine himself. His blood ran cold as he realized the gashes left by Sea Breeze had followed him into reality. He worked quickly to clean the cuts, hoping the she-cat beside him wouldn't notice and make a comment.
"'Bout time you got up!" Stonepaw snorted. Her fur relaxed as Hazepaw groomed himself. She seemed oblivious to the injuries he'd sustained. "You probably scared off all the prey in the forest with that racket you were making."

"Does it really matter?" Urchinpaw grunted from across the den as

he stretched. Then he clawed his nest to roll it up. The rustling of moss and leaves caught Hazepaw's attention. "We're leaving today anyways."

"We are?" Hazepaw was confused. He realized his denmates were busy pulling up their nests. A couple of them were destroying the structure of the den. But why?

"If you'd been awake earlier, you would have been present for Wavestar's meeting to know that." Otterpaw chimed in. She thrashed her tail impatiently. Then she turned and took hold of her nest and Whisperpaw's, dragging them outside without another word. A sense of longing built up Hazepaw's chest.
It'd been a while since the two of them had spoken properly. After the training incident with Whisperpaw, Otterpaw had been short with Hazepaw. She'd go out of her way to ignore him. And when she did say something, it was critical. Hazepaw had been wanting to apologize and make up for days now. But there never seemed to be an opportunity to do so. Perhaps if Urchinpaw was right, and the clan was moving back to the Twoleg Settlement Bridge, he could use the journey as a way to get close enough to Otterpaw to converse.

"There's a few tasks that need to be done," Urchinpaw informed as he padded over to the fluffy white tom. "Then we can finally go home."
Home. Hazepaw felt excitement bubble in his belly at the thought of living on the beach again. He missed the rhythmic crash of the ocean's waves, and the shrieks of seagulls in the sky overhead. Birdsong could never compare to the melody of the sea.
Hazepaw quickly rose to his paws, clawing up his leaf and moss mixed nest to be discarded outside. He followed the tail of Urchinpaw, getting pushed aside by the impatient Currentpaw as he neared the exit. Hazepaw growled at him as he passed, his sister Stonepaw at his heels. The she-cat took a moment to turn and stick her tongue out at Hazepaw before slipping into the clearing. Urchinpaw shook his head, running his tail along Hazepaw's back to calm him. Hazepaw heaved an indignant huff before walking with Urchinpaw outside.
The clearing was in ruin. Dens were being torn apart and materials

Oceanclan couldn't take with them were being discarded. All the hard work they'd put into the camp was being undone in a matter of moments. It was almost frustrating to witness. But Hazepaw tried to understand why it had to be this way. Oceanclan couldn't leave the temporary camp as it was. Rogues might move in, and foxes may be tempted to take up residence here to birth cubs. Treeclan might even try to claim the area and use it as a secondary base. But the land was still Oceanclan's, even though it was in part of the forest. Even if they wouldn't live here anymore this was still Oceanclan's hunting grounds; their territory. Hazepaw flexed his claws at the thought of having to protect this land that Oceanclan had slept on for the past couple of moons.

"C'mon, 'Paws, quit daydreamin'. Go scatter yer nests aroun' somewhere outside, then come back for yer next assignment," Silverdrop instructed, pulling Hazepaw from his thoughts. Urchinpaw motioned to him to follow, and the pair set out to complete their tasks.

The rest of the morning was spent deconstructing dens. Urchinpaw had gone off to take care of the nursery. Meanwhile, Hazepaw helped fill in Wavestar's den with earth; enough to keep it from being obvious that a hole lay under the soil. Sandclaw was with him, doing his part to bury the old badger set.
Otterpaw was nearby working with Whisperpaw. The pair were helping Bluesky bundle up herbs. Otterpaw looked grossed out by the task, her tongue poking out slightly. The scent of the watermint she was working with must have been too strong. Hazepaw chuckled at her reaction, watching the molly long enough for Whisperpaw to catch on. Whisperpaw bumped her shoulder against Otterpaw's, prompting the brown she-cat to regain her senses and straighten her expression.
Bluesky shook his head with amusement as he observed them. Then he was summoned away by Curlear, who was experiencing a coughing fit. The old hairless medicine cat had been sick for a while. His condition only seemed to worsen by the day. There was nothing that could be done about it, Hazepaw remembered Bluesky stating. Soon, Curlear would be called to join Starclan. But for now he was being cared for, as all elderly cats were. Though he wouldn't live long enough to experience retirement, Hazepaw was sure.

Across camp, Wavestar had perched himself on a low hanging tree branch. He yowled out, catching the attention of the entire clan. After scanning the clearing and ensuring everyone was present, the leader began to speak.

"Sun high approaches. It's about time we finally make our way back to the beach. Everyone grab whatever materials you can carry and start heading out!" He declared.
The clan immediately began to cheer, disbursing long enough to gather supplies. Then, one by one, each cat made their final exit from the temporary camp.
Wavestar led the way, with Bluesky and a limping Curlear right behind him. The elders left next. Dolphintail was guided by the flank of Precious; Oystersplash and Chloe following her tail. Sandybreeze brought up the rear of the group, ensuring the clan's oldest members travel safely. Hazepaw was sure she was being extra careful so a situation like what happened with Tunafin didn't reoccur. A shiver ran across him from nose to tail-tip at the thought. Hazepaw shook out his pelt to relieve himself of the sensation then followed after his mentor. Sharktooth sniffed at him as he passed, mentally marking Hazepaw as another clanmate accounted for. Pawsteps sounded softly from behind him a couple heartbeats later. Glancing over his shoulder to see who it was, Hazepaw was greeted by the presence of Otterpaw and Whisperpaw.
Whisperpaw was prancing at her friend's side, a happy little hop in each step. She hummed out a soft conversation, words muffled behind a bushel of herbs. Otterpaw giggled at the other molly, flicking an ear at her. Then, up ahead, Wavestar summoned his daughter to him. Whisperpaw excused herself and hurried away, leaving Otterpaw behind. *This is my chance*, Hazepaw realized. Purposely he slowed his pace until he fell back enough to walk in step with the brown she-cat. At first, she didn't seem to notice Hazepaw had done so intentionally. But when she realized he was padding perfectly in time with her, she grunted.
Hazepaw flashed a small smile at her, trying to break the ice with a kind gesture. Instead of reciprocating Otterpaw looked away indignitly, unaccepting of his silent greeting. Immediately Hazepaw's grin fell, replaced by an annoyed scowl. He resisted the urge to growl, becoming frustrated over his ignored efforts. It's not like he actually *wanted* to apologize. Even a half moon later,

Hazepaw thought that his actions the day he helped train Whisperpaw were justified. It wasn't like he didn't regret it part of it, though. Hazepaw never meant to upset Whisperpaw. But his method of teaching worked, and he still held the belief that he was in the right.
However, Hazepaw knew if he were to say that, he would never regain Otterpaw's friendship. But he really wanted to. Hazepaw wasn't exactly sure why. It could be Sea Breeze's influence. Or perhaps it was the fact that getting along with Otterpaw felt rewarding compared to being rivals or enemies. He liked being a reason to make her smile instead of angry. So if he had to admit he was wrong to regain that, then so be it.

"Hey...Otterpaw?" He mewed apprehensivly. "Can we talk?"
Otterpaw ignored him. Again, Hazepaw resisted the urge to growl. But he swallowed it back with a heavy sigh. "I know you probably hate me right now..." he started.

"Yeah, no kidding," Otterpaw gruffed.

"But I don't want you to," he continued, ignoring the she-cat's comment. "It's dumb that we haven't been talking, don't you think? You know I didn't mean any harm when we were training Whisperpaw together!"
Otterpaw's tail lashed, a clear sign of her irritation. Yet Hazepaw pressed on, determined to regain her favor.
"Look, what I'm trying to say is...I'm sorry. I really, truly didn't mean to upset her. Like you, I just want Whisperpaw to be the best warrior she can be. I...know I went about it the wrong way, though. And I promise to be better in the future. Can't we just go back to being friends now...please?"
Another few moments of silence past. The air was thick from the tension of the one sided conversation. Hazepaw felt like he could choke on it. He was sure if it were possible, Otterpaw would want him to. Then, at last, she spoke;

"...You really don't know when to give up, do you?"
Hazepaw flinched a little at her comment. He opened his mouth to defend himself, until Otterpaw interjected to continue speaking.
"In a way....I'm kind of glad you don't," she confessed. She lowered her head, almost bashfully. "It's been eating me up inside, not

talking to you. And just when we started becoming true friends, too!...But I needed to teach you a lesson. I wanted you to realize the weight of your actions before deciding to speak with you again. You really hurt Whisperpaw's feelings, y'know. She's always looked up to you. And then you go and drag her around like a piece of prey!"

"I didn't realize..." Hazepaw started, before being interrupted again.

"You rarely do, until it's too late. But I hope this has taught you to be a bit more mindful of your actions, before you dig in your claws about being in the right." Then, Otterpaw lifted her muzzle to look at him. The light of sunhigh sparkled in her yellow eyes, making them appear to glow. Hazepaw almost felt breathless as he stared back into them. "I'm going to forgive you this time. But you have to sincerely apologize to Whisperpaw before we can be friends again."

"I...I will," he stammered. Then he gave a rough nod, before moving to press his side against hers. "Thank you."

Otterpaw in turn bumped him with her hip playfully. Hazepaw purred at her. The pair spent the rest of the journey walking in step together, talking and joking around as if they hadn't ever disagreed. It made Hazepaw heart feel warm.
At some point, his thoughts drifted to his conversation with Sea Breeze. Perhaps she had been onto something, when she suggested he try and get closer to Otterpaw. Hazepaw hadn't noticed how well they got along, even after going a while without interacting. Maybe it would be worth it to pursue her. Then, Hazepaw thoughts shifted abruptly to Moonpaw. A pang on yearning groaned in his heart when he remembered he wouldn't be near her territory anymore. Perhaps it was fate. Maybe Starclan was using the migration to the beach as a sign to let Moonpaw go. But how could he? They'd grown so close since they met. He looked forward to meeting with Moonpaw every other night. He loved soothing her, and talking for hours on end. She seemed to enjoy his company too. Moonpaw confided in him, and Hazepaw had promised to be there for her. Yet, as the Forest Patch became nothing more than a green mirage in the distance, Hazepaw couldn't help but reconsider it. *No*, he finally decided as he heard Otterpaw snort over some stupid joke she'd cracked. *I don't have to decide anything yet. I need to focus more on training. But, I can still have fun inbetween.* Hazepaw smiled,

satisfied with the choice he'd made. For now, he'd enjoy the company of his friends, and grow to become a cat Oceanclan could be proud of.

Chapter 20

Dew dripped from the trees, sunshine reflecting beautifully within them. After a light drizzle in the early morning, the rest of the day promised warmth and light. Moonpaw shook out her pelt to clear it of moisture as she stood alongside several other apprentices. Sunpaw and his littermates were to one side of Moonpaw. Beside them were Smokepaw, Magpiepaw, Tigerpaw and her siblings. On Moonpaw's opposite side were Blackpaw and Beepaw. They were all standing along the edge of Tree Dome, their mentors on the opposite side. Between the divided groups was Thornberry, pacing around the sandy clearing to give instructions.

"'Paws," he started, "the first things you will be tested on today are your fighting skills. Each of you will be put up against another of your peers, and judged by your mentors as you spar. Winning isn't necessary to pass this part of your assessment. Rather, a good show of what you have learned will determine if you are prepared to move onto the next level of training." The deputy's gaze swept over each young cat as he spoke, an air of authority radiating from his coat. "Moonpaw, you're up first. Beepaw will be your opponent." Thornberry flicked his ear, prompting the named apprentices forward. Moonpaw's heart began to pound in her chest as she stepped forward to meet with Beepaw. Excitement and apprehension began to swirl in the apprentice's belly, causing it to ache and already begin to distract her. *I hope I will do well,* she thought as she lifted her chin to size up her opponent. Beepaw gave her a surprised look, as if she'd never expected her to act that way. It wasn't common for cats in Treeclan to size up others in battle, Moonpaw had almost forgotten. But she'd gotten used to the concept because of Hazepaw. It was something he'd told her that Oceanclan warriors did. He said it made a cat appear stronger and more intimidating to a foe, which could throw them off. Especially if the cat doing it wasn't as large or capable as their opponent might be. Moonpaw thought it could be interesting to try for herself, especially since she still wasn't confident in her fighting skills. But it seemed that was the wrong move to make.

Flinching, Moonpaw gave her head a quick dip in apology before moving into a more traditional fighting stance. Beepaw did the same, charging at the other apprentice when Thornberry gave the signal to start. The silver and black tabby was fast, too fast to evade. Moonpaw decided to take the she-cat head on as she came within striking distance.
Moonpaw threw a front paw blow, slapping Beepaw across the jaw. Beepaw recoiled at the hit then threw one of her own, knocking the other apprentice over with her strength. Moonpaw yelped in surprise as the older molly came upon her, trying to force her onto her back. But Moonpaw resisted, kicking out her back legs to trip up Beepaw. With a stumble, the tabby apprentice moved away just enough for Moonpaw to rise. Moonpaw's confidence was growing as the battle waged on, though she could feel the mentors' judgment upon her. With all the strength she could muster, the silver and white molly retaliated and pressed her own weight against the older apprentice. She wrapped her forepaws around her neck and grabbed for Beepaw's scruff; anything to incapacitate her and force her into surrender. Beepaw struggled beneath her denmate and soon fell to the floor, particles of sand and dust clouding around them. Moonpaw continued to push the silver tabby she-cat down, pretending to give her an injuring bite to the back of her neck. Beepaw let out a hiss, and finally went limp beneath her opponent. Moonpaw held her there for a few heartbeats more, until Thornberry called an end to the spar.

"Excellent work, both of you," he praised, prompting Moonpaw to yield her grip and step back. Beepaw rose to her paws with a full body shake. She gave Moonpaw a friendly smile, clearly impressed by the other molly's skills. Moonpaw felt warmth pool in her chest. She was glad to have beaten the older she-cat. More importantly, though, she was glad Beepaw was such a good sport about it.
After dipping their heads respectfully to one another, the two she-cats rejoined their peers at the edge of the tree-crowded hollow. Another pair of apprentices stepped forward; this time Foxpaw and Tinypaw. They both had an air of confidence about them, though Foxpaw seemed more assured of victory than Tinypaw did. Still, the undersized apprentice had determination blazing in her amber eyes, promising a good fight.
Upon Thornberry's signal, the apprentices met with a wave of paws.

Tinypaw was the first to strike, at first crouching to the floor before springing up at Foxpaw from beneath his chin. Foxpaw retaliated by throwing blows at Tinypaw's head and shoulders; strikes that would be painful, if the two were to fight with unsheathed claws. Tinypaw however seemed undeterred by the ginger tom's efforts of attack, using her forepaws to wrap around his neck. She tried with all her might to flip the tom over, but to no avail. Instead, Foxpaw flipped her, after grabbing her by the scruff.
Tinypaw was forced to lay belly up. But she smirked, as if this had been part of her plan all along. When Foxpaw moved to feign scratches to her delicate area, Tinypaw countered by swinging all four paws at him. Her hindpaws struck Foxpaw along his throat, while the front pretended to scratch his eyes and nose. Foxpaw backed away with a fake squeak of pain, shaking out his pelt before glaring at his opponent. Tinypaw managed to scramble back onto her feet, arching her back to look more menacing. After a couple heartbeats of posturing, the apprentices met again. Foxpaw made a move to strike, which Tinypaw easily evaded. She ran around the tom's side, aiming to get behind him. Foxpaw whipped around to stop her, swiping again. Tinypaw barely dodged the second blow, rounding the ginger tom again. This happened several more times, until it seemed that Foxpaw was growing tired. *She's trying to use her size and speed to her advantage,* Moonpaw realized.
Foxpaw was panting at this point, his eyes intensely trained on his opponent. When Tinypaw made her move to go around him once more, Foxpaw had a hard time keeping up. Tinypaw finally succeeded with her plan of jumping on his back from behind. She grabbed his scruffed, trying to force the other apprentice to the floor. *She was doing so good!* Moonpaw griped internally. *Tinypaw knows she doesn't have the weight necessary to push him down.*
Then, Foxpaw bucked his hindquarters, throwing Tinypaw off himself unceremoniously. With a shriek, Tinypaw came falling towards the forest floor. But it was calculated, as she kicked out her hindlegs and spun once she landed in front of Foxpaw. Foxpaw's feet were stolen out from under him, forcing the tom to crash to the ground. Again, Tinypaw grabbed his scruff, shoving a paw onto his face. Then, Thornberry called the match.

"Great work. Your choice of moves were unique to say the least. But nonetheless you both did well," the deputy complimented, sending

the apprentices back to their ranks.
The rest of the battles went similarly. Flamepaw and Blackpaw were called forward next. They were almost evenly matched, and the spar went on longer than any cat expected. Both apprentices' techniques were aggressive, and Flamepaw accidentally bit his opponent's ear in the heat of their brawl. Though he drew blood, the injury was luckily minor. Still, that didn't stop Thornberry and Thrushmask from scolding the tom for his error. Thornberry decided to call the match after that and sent the toms to stand with their peers again.
Then it was Sunpaw and Magpiepaw's turn. Though he had an extra moon of training over her, Sunpaw was no match for Moonpaw's sister. She won pretty quickly, as Sunpaw had stumbled his way through the fight. He looked a little embarrassed once they were sent back to the sidelines. Moonpaw purred at him, giving her friend a warm smile.
Adderpaw fought against Tigerpaw. The two seemed to have the most fun during their mock battle, throwing witty banter between them as they threw paws and jumped at one another. In the end, Tigerpaw ended up being the winner, which she happily and loudly gloated about before being silenced and sent to sit beside Moonpaw. Moonpaw shouldered her best friend playfully as Tigerpaw giggled at her with glee.
Lastly, Deerpaw was called forward. He was a Code Keeper apprentice, and not meant to know how to fight. But he was expected to be able to defend himself. So, Thornberry called Smokepaw up to face him. The fight was pretty one sided the whole time. Though he wanted to show off his skills, Smokepaw was delicate with Deerpaw. He kept him on the defensive, but left openings for Deerpaw to strike if he wanted. The brown tabby's timid nature got the better of himself though, which gave Smokepaw a clear advantage. He managed to win, but not without feeling some guilt for it. Moonpaw tilted her head for him sympathetically, and Smokepaw gave her a small, regret filled smile in return.

"That brings the end of the battle portion of your assessment," Thornberry decided. "Your next task is to hunt. Bring home as much prey as you can. All will be judged on their technique, form, and speed, rather than amount caught. But- yes, Tigerpaw- you *may* be

given extra points depending on the type of prey you catch. You have until sundown to complete this assignment." Once again Thornberry looked at each apprentice in turn. Blinking slowly, he added; "May the branches hold your weight."
Then, with a flick of his stubby tail, Treeclan's deputy dismissed the group. Adderpaw was the first to take off into the woods, Magpiepaw not far behind. One by one, each apprentice picked their own direction to stalk in. Moonpaw decided to turn around and head west. She'd hunt as far away from the Tree Dome and Treeclan's camp as possible, to ensure she'd find plentiful amounts of prey.
At this time of day, the forest was alive with activity. Birds chittered as they flew from branch to branch, singing their mating songs. The trees slowly blossomed as the warmth of the Newleaf sun shined upon them. Steam rose from the grass underpaw as dew evaporated with the growing heat. Mushrooms overtook fallen logs. Spiderwebs spread like gray film over ferns, and insects buzzed around fresh plant growths. Most importantly the sounds of tiny creatures skittering through the undergrowth made their presence known. Moonpaw opened her mouth to taste the air and see what was available. There was a quail digging about, around two fox-lengths away. A shrew crawled out from it's burrow a tail-length and a half in the opposite direction. But the scent of cat overwhelmed the delectable smell of prey closeby. One of Treeclan's other apprentices was hunting here. *I'll have a hard time catching anything with competition around*, Moonpaw decided, continuing westward until she could no longer scent any clanmates around. Allowing the sounds and vibrations of the forest to guide her, the silver and white apprentice closed her eyes; getting a good feeling of the area surrounding her. A twig suddenly snapped nearby, grabbing Moonpaw's attention. An inexperienced young rabbit was making its way through the bushes. Its tiny twitchy nose snuffled through some fallen flower petals, detecting fresh sprigs of grass hidden beneath. It munched on its meal, unbothered, and most importantly unaware of the predator that lurked close by. Moonpaw quickly dropped into a crouch, prowling through the undergrowth with as little noise as possible. Her pelt briefly brushed along some shrubs, drawing the rabbit's attention. It sat upright, staring straight at Moonpaw. But the silver and white molly was too well hidden for its weak eyes to detect. So after another tense heartbeat, the rabbit

relaxed and returned to its grazing. Moonpaw let out a silent sigh, then pressed on to close the gap between herself and her prey. When she was only a tail-length away, Moonpaw shot out of the undergrowth and lauched right onto the rabbit. She felt the lilthe creature gasp beneath her as her teeth fastened to the back of its neck. Before it could cry out or feel any suffering, Moonpaw snapped its spinal cord, ending its life. The rabbit went limp in her jaws, and Moonpaw silently thanked Starclan for its life.

After hiding it beneath a thick clump of sticks and mulch, Moonpaw went on to catch a mouse and a pigeon to add to her fresh-kill pile. But the sounds of prey died away in her area after the fact, prompting her to press forward in her search for food. As she stalked along, Moonpaw swore she saw a pair of intense amber eyes observing her through the trees.

Further ahead, a sharp acidic tang passed through Moonpaw's scent glands, nearly causing her to gag. She recognized the smell from one of her first tours of Treeclan's territory. It was the Thunder Path. She must not be to far from it, she figured. Prey would become more scarce the closer she drew. So Moonpaw decided to turn around and hunt elsewhere. But before she left, she spotted Flamepaw nearby, tracking a very fat squirrel. His form was flawless, and he moved as silent as a owl as he stalked. *He'll catch the squirrel for sure!* Moonpaw bet, tucking herself behind a mulberry bush to watch him make the catch. As Flamepaw readied himself to pounce, a hefty gust of wind kicked up, blowing downwind of him. The fuzzy creature sat up as it caught the scent of cat on the breeze. Its pupils grew wide and it scampered off without a moment of hesitation. *Tough luck!* Moonpaw pouted. Flamepaw stood upright as his prey got away, chattering his teeth. His tail lashed with frustration, too. Moonpaw was just about to turn around to allow him to go back to hunting, when she heard a cat hiss out; "What are you doing!?"

Moonpaw jolted, crouching further behind her bush. The cat meowed again, only this time Moonpaw was sure they were addressing Flamepaw. She couldn't see who it was though, nor could she recognize their voice from this distance. The wind was blowing opposite of Moonpaw's direction, so she couldn't scent them either.

"Do you want to fail your assessment?" The cat threatened. Flamepaw shook his head. "Then go after it!"

"But-" Flamepaw whipped his head from the cat, towards his prey's direction, and back.

"Go *now!*" The cat yowled, scaring the squirrel into running faster. Flamepaw groaned and sprinted away from the unidentified feline, hurrying after the squirrel as fast as his legs could carry him. Moonpaw decided to follow from a safe distance, interested in seeing if Flamepaw could catch his prey before it was too far from reach.
The scent of the Thunder Path grew stronger as Moonpaw made her way along, until the black stone river came into view at the bottom of the hill. The squirrel was headed right for it. And so was Flamepaw. Worry began to creep its way into Moonpaw's belly. But she pushed it back, assuring herself that Flamepaw wouldn't be stupid enough to try and pursue the creature once it touched the monster path. But to her dismay, Flamepaw didn't seem to be slowing down. Moonpaw's heart clenched. She pushed her paws to move faster, pelting her way towards her denmate to stop him before it was too late.
The squirrel soon made it to the edge of the Thunder Path, and paused to look over its shoulder. Spotting Flamepaw, the lengthy rodent took the risk and scampered across. Moonpaw was certain this was where Flamepaw was stop. But he didn't. Her heart began to pound faster as she watched the ginger tom race after the squirrel, his claws nearly scraping its tail. A rumbling sound was rounding the nearby corner; a warning of danger approaching.

"Flamepaw!" Moonpaw yowled as she drew close to the Thunder Path's edge. But her cry was left unheard.
As her pawpads made contact with the unnaturally warm stone, Flamepaw had managed to snatch up the squirrel. Moonpaw wanted so desperately to celebrate her clanmate's triumph at that moment; but she couldn't. A monster had come roaring along the path, speeding past Moonpaw like a spark of lightning. It'd missed her by a whisker-length, striking Flamepaw instead. Red and gray flashed across Moonpaw's vision; her fur swept aside with the rush of wind and smoke the monster left behind in its wake. Moonpaw shut her eyes and coughed, just as the blood curdling cry of her clanmate ran out. Then, just as quickly, everything fell into silence. Shaking, Moonpaw spared herself of the sight she knew she was

about to see for a moment more. She took a few pawsteps back. Then, bravely, she peeked open her eyes.
Flamepaw had been thrown across to the other bank of the Thunder Path, his blood steaked vibrantly across it.
Moonpaw gasped. She backed up to the safety of the forest's edge in her panic. Then, she hurried to check on her clanmate before she had time to stop herself. *He could still be alive,* some optimistic part of her mind yowled.
Moonpaw climbed up a tree near the Thunder Path. She balanced her way to the edge of one branch, then bravely leaped across to another. The second branch bounced as it took on her weight, steadying after a few heartbeats. Moonpaw sucked in a breath as she crawled across it over towards the other side of the path.

"Flamepaw! Flamepaw, can you hear me?" She cried out again, trying to gauge the tom's level of consciousness. But her call was never answered. Moonpaw climbed down from the second tree to inspect her clanmate. But as soon as she touched down onto the grass, she wished she hadn't. From the other side, all Moonpaw had been able to see was a large river of blood, and Flamepaw's back. But from this angle she got to see *all* of Flamepaw.
She first caught his expression. His eyes were as wide as a full moon, and jaws gaped at an awkward angle. The squirrel lay only a nose's length from his open mouth.
Flamepaw's entrails were the next thing to catch Moonpaw's attention. They were completely exposed, leaking partially on the grass, but mostly on the stone. His abdomen was caved in from the weight of the monster running over him. His smell had almost instantly become pungent as it mixed with the odor of the Thunder Path itself.
Finally, Moonpaw noticed the blood and body matter. It was everywhere; splattered all over the ground, seeping into the grass, and now it was all over her paws. She'd been too flabbergasted by what happened to realize she'd been stepping in it. But once she did, Moonpaw jumped back, shaking her paws as if she'd just gotten it out of the creek. A brief moment of panic washed over her, before another bout of determination took its place. She had to get help. There was no time to stand around and cry.
With body quaking, Moonpaw turned and went back the way she came, clambering up one tree, crossing into another, and coming

down on the other side. When she got there she spotted Darkfire standing nearby, staring at Flamepaw. Her eyes were wide, but nothing else gave away the emotions she might be feeling at that moment. Then, the tortoiseshell warrior looked to Moonpaw.

"Call out for help," she commanded before turning away. Moonpaw hoped she was going to get Mothsong, or Blazestar. But she didn't have any time to make sure. Instead she ran through the forest, yowling out to grab the attention of any other clanmates she could. Leafheart was the first to emerge from the woods, worry etching her every feature. Moonpaw had hoped her mentor would not be the cat to answer her cries. Then Thornberry came along, followed by Blackpaw and Smokepaw. Each cat looked to Moonpaw for answers. The only thing she could do at that moment was look at Leafheart and mewl;

"Fl..Flamepaw...."
That's all Leafheart needed to hear. Between the haunted look of her apprentice, the scent of blood, and the name of her son, the ginger tabby she-cat was eager to follow. She wanted to see what had become of Flamepaw. Moonpaw led her clanmates to him, standing back a bear-length from the edge of the Thunder Path. The thought of another monster rolling past her like the previous one gave her chills. Moonpaw would be certain never to step foot on the black stone ever again.

"No..." she heard Leafheart whisper, as Thornberry made the climb to check on the orange tom. Smokepaw followed him, while Blackpaw remained pressed to Leafheart's side. Moonpaw moved to flank her other side as Thornberry made it to Flamepaw. His fluffy brownish-black pelt bushed with alarm when he saw the state the apprentice was in. Smokepaw gagged at the sight, turning to vomit into the grass. Then Leafheart began to sob, relying on the apprentices beside her to keep her upright.
"Flamepaw!" She cried out, "Starclan, no, *not my son*!"

Chapter 21

Warriors came rushing to aid as they heard the cry of the ginger she-cat ring clear across the forest. Leafheart hunched over the mutilated body of her son, Flamepaw, and Moonpaw watched on helplessly. There was so much happening all at once that it was hard to concentrate.
Moonpaw blinked, seeing Thornberry and some of the other mentors gather to console the grieving she-cat. Then, in the next moment, when Moonpaw blinked again, Smokepaw was beside her. He appeared to be speaking, judging by the movement of his mouth, but no words could be heard. The only thing Moonpaw could hear was the rapid thumping of her heart and a ringing in her ears. She tried to force herself to pay attention. But it was difficult. She didn't feel like she was present at the moment. Her body didn't feel like her own.
Moonpaw stared with wide unfocused eyes at the smokey gray tom. He continued to try and communicate. Then Smokepaw's brows furrowed as he realized Moonpaw couldn't understand him. He turned, and Moonpaw blinked again.
The next thing she knew, she was being led through the woods. Beepaw walked on one side of her, just behind Smokepaw. She was saying something, but again, nothing seemed legible to Moonpaw. Time flew away from her like a bird on a strong gale, because the next thing she knew, the group was entering Treeclan's camp. Mothsong and Berrypaw ran over to them, checking every cat over. They seemed so distant to Moonpaw, like they were walking just at the edge of her vision. Smokepaw gestured towards his littermate, and for the first time in a while, Moonpaw could partially make out what was being said.

"She's... ...shock," Mothsong noted, her words cutting in and out of Moonpaw's consciousness. Moonpaw could barely feel the brush of the medicine cat's tail against her shoulder as she was prompted to follow towards the healer's den. An orange blob lay near her feet as she passed. Yet her mind wouldn't allow her to focus well enough to see exactly what the shape was.

Moonpaw then found herself settling into a nest as the calico she-cat brought over some herbs. *I'm not sick*, Moonpaw protested internally, confusion clouding her mind. She wasn't the one who should be tended to right now. But Mothsong didn't seem to think so, judging by the look of concern on her face.

"...eat...." Moonpaw barely heard her say. And though she felt like taking the medicine was pointless, Moonpaw followed directions anyways. She swallowed bitter plants first--thyme and goatweed, Moonpaw remembered their names being. Next, a tiny seed rolled onto her tongue and slithered down her throat, just as a soothing scent entered into her nostrils. *Chamomile?* Moonpaw guessed as her head grew heavy. She saw Mothsong in front of her. The beautiful medicine cat signed the word "sleep" in the Silent Language. Then, as if on command, Moonpaw found herself being pulled into a deep, restless slumber.
An uncountable amount of time passed before Moonpaw stirred awake. Her head felt heavy and body felt numb as all of her consciousness returned to her at last. She could finally think and see clearly. The medicine Mothsong had given her worked wonders on her foggy mind. But now Moonpaw felt stiff as a log. Stretching, the silver and white she-cat moved to stand from her nest. But before she could, a rustling sounded from the entrance of the medicine den. Moonpaw curled back up into her sleeping spot, not wanting to be reprimanded for leaving it before she was given permission. Two cat-scents made their way to her nose, before she could see who was coming.

"I'm glad I could catch you," Moonpaw recognized the smell and mew of Mothsong.

The second scent belonged to Wolfheart. "I was already on my way here. I wanted to check on Moonpaw."

"You must be Starclan sent, then."

"What do you mean?"
The medicine cat ushered the gray and white tom deep into the den, past Moonpaw and closer to the medicine stores. She didn't speak a word, but motioned for the tom to make himself comfortable.

Wolfheart wrapped his tail around himself as he sat, his back facing Moonpaw.
"Has something happened?" Wolfheart spoke aloud the question his daughter had in mind. His voice was pleading, begging to know what knowledge Mothsong withheld. Moonpaw peered through half-squinted eyes, trying to gauge what was going on without being caught.
Mothsong sat next to the wall of her den, too distant to notice her patient had woken up. Her focus was rested on Wolfheart. A turbulent expression took over her features as she paused a moment or two to find the right things to say.

"Starclan sent me a dream early this morning. A prophesy they wish to be shared."

"A...prophesy?" Wolfheart sounded to be in disbelief. Moonpaw shared his sentiment. Prophecies were rare. It was even rarer for them to be shared with an ordinary cat. But if Mothsong was so insistent with telling Wolfheart about it, then he must be involved somehow.
Excitement began to bloom in Moonpaw's chest. Was Wolfheart a prophesy cat? That would mean he would be a hero, just like in the stories of the ancients Badgerface spoke of!

Mothsong lifted her chin, her eyes growing dim. When she parted her jaws to recite Starclan's words, she spoke in a voice that did not sound like her own. "*A great threat lurks, brought forth by darkness and forged by wolf's strength. Only when the moon can face its fate will the night rise. Do whatever possible to keep its light alive.*"

The air grew thick with tension as silence settled in. A few heavy moments passed. Mothsong appeared to return to normal. Still, there was unease between both the adult cats.

Wolfheart swayed his tail thoughfully. "...What does it mean?"

Mothsong shook her head. "I do not know. But this is the message Starclan has asked me to share."

"And they wanted you to share it with me...? Why? Do you think...it has something to do with my daughter?" Her father's fur was

bristling, as if he were afraid. The faint scent of fear creeped its way to Moonpaw's nose, confirming her suspicion. Was he scared that Starclan had wanted to share a message with him? Or was he more fretful of what the prophesy meant? Moonpaw, too, found herself wondering what their words foretold. It wasn't the prediction of grandeur and heroism she had hoped for her father. Instead it sounded to be a more illfated warning.

"It's a possibility. But there's a chance the message could be more metaphorical as well. All I know for certain, is that things will reveal themselves in their due time."

"That's true." Wolfheart sighed. "I just...hope this doesn't mean Moonpaw's in danger." Moonpaw saw Wolfheart's head shift. He must have been glancing at her over his shoulder. But she couldn't exactly see his eyes from the direction his body faced. There was a sag of guilt in the gray and white tom's posture, as if whatever was prophesied was his fault. Love and sympathy squeezed Moonpaw's heart. She wanted so badly to sit up and comfort her father, but she would be caught easedropping if she were to do so.

Mothsong rested her tail upon Wolfheart's shoulder reassuringly. "Whatever happens is in the paws of Starclan. But they have never steered us wrong before. So please, have faith in them, and whatever their plans may be."
I will keep faith in them, Moonpaw swore, peering over at her dad as she hoped he'd do the same.

The gray and white tom fell silent for a moment. "...I trust your wisdom, Mothsong. But please, if you learn anything new, let me know first."

"Of course." Mothsong blinked slowly.

As if summoned by the thought of him, Wolfheart turned around to face his kit. Moonpaw quickly shut her eyes, hoping her father didn't see her awake. Heartbeats later she felt his fur pressing to hers, and the rumble of a purr in his chest.

"Are you waking up already, chipmunk?" He checked. Moonpaw resisted the urge to flinch. Instead, she slowly fluttered open her

eyes, looking up at the loving face of her kin.

"Papa...?" She feigned fatigue in her voice as she spoke. Wolfheart smiled down at her, running his tongue over her ears and cheeks.

"How are you feeling?" He asked.
Tired, miserable, confused, were some of the words that came to mind. Instead of speaking Moonpaw shrugged, resting her head against her paws.
"I understand," Wolfheart hummed, nuzzling her. "You should rest more. Hopefully you'll feel like yourself after."
That sounds like a good idea, Moonpaw agreed and gave a yawn. Wolfheart rose from her side and walked out of the medicine den. Mothsong followed him out not long afterwards with flowers in her jaws.
Moonpaw rested for a while more, ruminating in thoughts of the present and the future. Most of all she thought about the prophesy and what it could mean. Eventually, her body grew tired of laying in its resting position. Her paws itched to move and go into the camp where the rest of the clan would be gathered. With a swish of her tail, Moonpaw stood and padded out of the medicine den.
In the center of camp, Flamepaw's body laid. Berrypaw had just finished rubbing herbs into his pelt. But he wasn't able to cover up the death scent in time. Due to the long journey home, and the state of Flamepaw's body, birds of prey managed to catch on to the passing of the young apprentice. When Moonpaw looked up she could see a hawk soaring by the dusk kissed clearing every now and then. But the threatening hoot of an owl kept the other predator away. Tonight's vigil would be extra guarded, Moonpaw bet. A shiver ran down her spine as she made her approach towards her deceased clanmate. Several cats were ahead of her, each taking a few moments to sit close to Flamepaw and share tongues with him one last time. Then they'd move aside, allowing other cats to come forward and do the same. Most cats remained in the open to sit vigil for the remainder of the night. While those too young, old, or not close enough to Flamepaw took their leave and headed to their dens to sleep.
As Moonpaw took her turn to sit vigil, she noticed Den Keepers scaling the trees in camp. With precision and care, they wrapped greenbrier vines around branches, high above where any cat would

normally climb. They used moss and broad leaves to grip the thorny appendages tying them tightly before descending to the ground. The vines were a cautionary measure, to deter feathered fiends from landing within striking range of the camp. *Good*, Moonpaw sighed with a bit of relief, tucking her legs beneath her as she bowed her head near Flamepaw's and prayed.

After her prayer, Moonpaw lifted her muzzle and began to groom his cheek. His fur smelled strongly of lavender and death, but beneath--if one pressed their nose close--Flamepaw's natural scent could be caught. Moonpaw did her best to commit it to memory. Then she rose to her paws, and after one last press of their foreheads together, the silver molly moved away. As she did, Leafheart looked to her apprentice and nodded at her thankfully. Moonpaw returned the warrior's gesture with a respectful head dip. Then she moved to flank her mother and father, who watched on from the edge of camp. Moonpaw saw yerning crackling in Wolfheart's pale green eyes as she settled with him. His focus was fixed on Blazestar who sat solemnly beside his mate.

Brightsky nudged Wolfheart encouragly with her muzzle, prompting the gray and white warrior to go sit beside his old friend. Wolfheart seemed cautious as he moved to take the chance and padded over to Blazestar. He dipped his head deeply to the clan's leader before taking a seat beside him. Wolfheart looked between his clanmates as if waiting to be judged. But no one spoke out. Instead, Blazestar rested his tail on the younger tom's shoulders and blinked at him with gratitude. He seemed to be reassuring Wolfheart of something. Whatever that may be breathed a small puff of confidence into the gray and white tom. Moonpaw was happy that her father could be there to support Blazestar.

Beside her, Brightsky sniffled a little, her cheek fur dampened with tears. At the other side of her, Magpiepaw laid. Her muzzle was buried in their mother's fur for comfort. Moonpaw wanted to say some soothing words to them both, but for once she had nothing to mew about. Grief tightened in her chest. All Moonpaw wanted to do right now was enjoy the comfort of her living loved ones. Speaking of loved ones, Moonpaw's thoughts suddenly landed on Hazepaw. Would he be waiting for her tonight? Something had held him up from joining the Gathering yesterday. Surely he'd be wanting to see Moonpaw tonight instead. *Should I really sneak away to go see Hazepaw, though?* Moonpaw wondered as her gaze flitted between

her clanmates. Seeing their miserable faces made Moonpaw feel even worse. No one would be of great comfort here. So, Moonpaw set her mind on going off into the woods alone. Backing away, Moonpaw turned tail and headed for the Entrance Tree. Smokepaw called out to her as she climbed, asking where she was going.

"I need some space..." Moonpaw confessed before taking off into the trees. Wind flowed through her long fur as she ran across the forest towards the familiar rocks of Rubble Path. The trees thinned the closer she drew to the territory's edge, until finally only grass and sand remained. Moonpaw parted her jaws to taste the air. She needed to know Hazepaw was waiting for her. But any scent of hin was stale. *Maybe he's disguising it,* Moonpaw hoped.

"Hazepaw?" She called out, stalking to the top of Rubble Path. She peered down, looking between the jagged stones for a familiar white pelt. Then her eyes began to comb the sand and brush nearby. "Hazepaaaaw!" She called again, her voice echoing with the rise in volume. But no reply ever came. Nor did anyone emerge from the dark surrounding her. Great disappointment weighed heavily upon Moonpaw, even worse than what she'd felt the night before.
"Hazepaw..." tears began to well in the silver and white molly's eyes. She sniffed, then hung her head. *I need you...* the words remained inside her mind as she sobbed softly to herself. Moonpaw let herself cry alone for a while, until the worse of her grief was finally released. Then after calming down, she turned, retreating back home to curl up in the paws of her family.

As the first rays of sunlight began to crawl across the forest, Treeclan gathered together as one within the clearing of camp. They huddled in a large circle around the deceased apprentice they mourned. Some cats parted to allow Badgerface, Daisypetal, and Elmfoot through. Mothsong and Berrypaw had just finished wrapping Flamepaw's torso with vines--to keep him in one piece during the move. The medicine cats dipped their heads in respect to the elders as they got out of their way. Guards came to surround the old warriors as they took their place around Flamepaw.
Then, Daisypetal lifted her muzzle and began to release a keening cry into the morning air. Blazestar joined her, with Leafheart and

their kits joining two heartbeats after. Moonpaw heart ached as she listened to their cries. Then she brought up her nose and joined the rest of her clanmates in a mourning song. Flamepaw's spirit was being commended to Starclan; his soul likely accepted by this time after facing judgment in the Twilight Passage. *Flamepaw was a good cat. Silverpelt will welcome him with open paws*, Moonpaw assured herself as the clan finally finished singing. Then, the elders lifted Flamepaw's body. Flanked by the Guards, the old warriors marched the deceased tom towards the thorn barrier and out of Treeclan's camp one last time. The clan watched after them for a few extra moments before finally breaking apart. Some cats went about their duties for the day. Others headed to their dens for a nap. Moonpaw contemplated doing the same, the weight of all that happened still heavy upon her. But Moonpaw knew she'd have no luck sleeping. So, instead, she took herself to the nursery.

Brightsky trilled in surprise as she noticed her daughter following her tail. "Moonpaw? Do you need something?"

"I want to have a talk with the queens," Moonpaw explained earning a nod of understanding from her mother. Brightsky ushered the silver and white molly into the nursery with a whisk of her tail. Moonpaw ducked beneath the large tree roots as she padded down the slope into the den. Since light had barely managed to greet the world, there was no need to adjust to the darkness within. Mapleshine and Silverhawk sat up in their nests, their attention focused on Moonpaw. Surely they knew she was here for a session with them. And the pair seemed ready to listen to all that needed to be said. Moonpaw sat in a spot between all the queen's nests. But she sat closest of all to her mom.

"Speak, child," Silverhawk prompted with a nod. Her gesture was welcoming and wise. "Get whatever you need off your chest."

Moonpaw took a deep breath, then spilled her guts about everything. About watching Flamepaw's hunt, and how he pushed himself to chase the squirrel to the Thunder Path. She described how she felt witnessing his death, and confessed just how close she'd been to being struck as well. And she spoke about her experience with shock. The only things Moonpaw omitted were the prophesy she'd overhead in Mothsong's den, and any talk of

Hazepaw. Though Moonpaw desperately wanted to speak of how Hazepaw had failed her last night. But that would take admitting to sneaking off to see him. Moonpaw wasn't willing to divulge that secret.
After listening to the last of her vent, the queens finally took their turn to speak.

"Oh, love," Brightsky crooned, nuzzling her daughter's cheek. She moved forward, wrapping herself around her kit."You know what happened to Flamepaw wasn't your fault."

"I know...." Moonpaw sighed, leaning into her mother. "But I was *there*! I feel like I could have saved him...."

"From what it sounds like, you were barely off from becoming crowfood yourself," Silverhawk chimed in, rather crassly. She lifted a back paw to lick between her toes. "Another heartbeat more and you'd be right alongside him in the burial grounds. There was no saving Flamepaw."

"But maybe if he'd heard me calling out for him, he would have stopped?" Moonpaw rationalized.

"There's no use dwelling on the 'what if's,' and 'maybe's,' hon," the Den Mother countered softly. "What's done is done. No cat blames you for not being able to do more."

Mapleshine twitched her whiskers agreeingly. "Besides, you *did* do something. You went to get help! No cat would have found Flamepaw for quite some time if you hadn't been there to alert the clan of his accident."

But there was another cat around, Moonpaw remembered suddenly. Darkfire had been nearby the Thunder Path. Yet she'd done nothing to stop or save the young apprentice. *But why?* Moonpaw wondered. Had Darkfire not seen Flamepaw get hit? Moonpaw was unsure. But she didn't want to incriminate Darkfire by mentioning her presence. Even if sessions were meant to be kept confidential. *It doesn't matter anyways,* Moonpaw told herself. *Maybe I'm just looking for someone else to blame.*

"Thank you all for listening," Moonpaw mewed with a head dip. "I'm feeling a bit better now. I think...I think I'll go find something to do to keep my mind off of things."

"That sounds like a good idea," Mapleshine agreed. "When you leave, would you mind sending my kits into nursery? It's time they got some rest."

"Sure," Moonpaw agreed with a stretch as she got up. Once more she dipped her head in respect to the queens before making her way out of their den.
By the elder's tree, Moonpaw spotted Mapleshine's kits playing. They were with Sunpaw, who batted at Honeykit and Sleekkit, while Peonykit tried to nab his tail. He laughed, looking so care free. It was as if he hadn't just lost one of his brothers. Maybe Sunpaw was distracting himself with the joy of the kits. Maybe it was his way of coping. Moonpaw hated to ruin his fun. But Mapleshine had requested her kits to come home to her. So, Moonpaw made her way over to the group slowly, only speaking when she became noticed.

"It's Moonpaw!" Honeykit squealed with joy. They rushed over to the apprentice, stretching up to touch noses with her. "Hi!!"

"Hello." Moonpaw purred in greetings. Her gaze moved from the golden kit in front of her to the others. "Its time for you all to go to the nursery. Your mother is waiting."

"But I don't wanna sleep yet!" Sleekkit griped. "Nightpaw said when we're apprentices, we have to be ready early in the morning for the dawn patrol!"

"That's *when* you're apprentices though," Sunpaw chimed. "You have a few more moons until then. For now, you have to do what your mom tells you. Besides, you've been awake all night. You've gotta be tired by now, right?"

"No!" Sleekkit squeaked, just as a yawn bubbled from his chest. The black and white kit's pelt fluffed with embarrassment. Moonpaw and Sunpaw both chuckled with small *mrrows* of laughter.

"C'mon, let's walk them home," Moonpaw suggested, sweeping her tail around the kits. Sunpaw followed them, matching pace with Moonpaw.

"How are you feeling?" He checked. "I saw you go into the medicine den yesterday."

"I'm alright now. I was in shock, after being so close to the monster and seeing Flamepaw..." she trailed off.

Sunpaw nodded, sadness glowing in his eyes. "I'm relieved that you're ok, at least."

Moonpaw made a small noise, pressing her body against his. Sunpaw purred in response, leaning into her embrace.
"Why don't we go out hunting once the kits are in their den?" She suggested suddenly. "I think we could both benefit from time away from the clan. And it would take our minds off of things for a while."

Sunpaw thought for a few moments as they walked. "That sounds nice. I'd like to spend some time with you," he admitted. The ginger tom seemed to cheer up a little at the prospect of going out together. Moonpaw had to admit she felt excited, too. After saying farewell to Mapleshine's kits, the pair of apprentices took off for the Entrance Tree and out into the forest, where they spent the rest of the morning forgetting their sadness together.

Chapter 22

The shrill squawking of seagulls in the sky disturbed the slumber of the newly settled Oceanclan. Hazepaw roused from his nest, groggy and a little annoyed by the noise. But when he stretched and felt sand brush the sides of his paws, a bubble of excitement grew in his chest. *That's right, we're back on the beach!* He remembered and celebrated internally as he sat up to tidy his pelt. Grains of sand met his tongue, salty and earthy all at once. It felt like forever since he had so much sediment in his fur. It was comforting in a way. A sensation Hazepaw never knew he'd miss. But he'd never admit that to anyone. Instead it would remain his private joy as he got up and ready for whatever the day would bring.

The sunlight outside the apprentice's den was shaded over by the protection of the Twoleg Settlement Bridge. Only the smallest of sunbeams managed to sneak their way through the cracks of the wooden ceiling. Hazepaw settled into one of those spots for a heartbeat, allowing the warmth to soak on his face and wake him. Once he was sufficiently alert, the fluffy white tom made his way to the fresh-kill pile. A few small fish and rodents lay within it. It was rather pitiful looking, and meant cats would need to go out and hunt soon. For now, Hazepaw chose three mice and carried them to the elder's den. Though he hated dealing with the old fools, he knew he'd have to feed them before taking anything for himself. Dolphintail was the first to be alerted of his presence underneath the old boat, the scent of prey luring her over. Though she didn't seem at all pleased that it was Hazepaw delivering today's breakfast. Still, the eldest of Oceanclan's ranks accepted the food she was offered, and carried it to another part of the den to be consumed.

Closeby, Whisperpaw was working on taking ticks off of Chloe. The elders had gathered many during their time in the Forest Patch. Now that they were home, the old cats could be properly cleansed of the nasty little parasites. It seemed Whisperpaw was just finishing up as Hazepaw dropped a mouse at the elderly kittypet's paws.

"You couldn'ta brought a gull instead?" Chloe griped with an indignant tail lash. Hazepaw growled at the old she-cat in frustration, glaring at her sharply. Whisperpaw shook her head, silently begging him not to start a fight. After a heartbeat and a huff, Hazepaw backed away, delivering his last mouse to Oystersplash.

"Thank you," the elder mewed gratefully as he tucked into his meal. Hazepaw dipped his head to the old warrior, pleased to know at least one cat was satisfied.
Then he padded back to where Whisperpaw was working. He still needed to speak with her and apologize, like Otterpaw wanted. Now was as good a time as any to make up.

"...I'm surprised you can stand to be in the same den as me right now," he remarked after watching Whisperpaw clean up for a few quiet moments. "You've been so skittish whenever I'm around."

Whisperpaw jolted at the sound of his voice, the fur on her spine standing a little. She continued to tidy up as they carried on a conversation, as if she were trying to distract herself. "Well, I can't avoid you forever..." she responded, her voice as quiet as ever. She glanced over her shoulder then back to a mousebile and tick soiled mossball she'd rolled up. "Besides. Otterpaw told me about the talk you two had."

"She did?" Hazepaw ears perked. Perhaps Otterpaw had done some of the hard part and talked Whisperpaw into hearing him out. "I...don't suppose she told you how sorry I am on my behalf, though, did she?" Hazepaw lifted his chin hopefully.
Whisperpaw turned, tilting her head at him, unamused. She knew well what Hazepaw was talking about. But she clearly wanted to hear the words come out of his own muzzle.
Hazepaw gave a disgruntled sigh. "Right. Ok. Well listen, Whisperpaw. I'm sorry for the way I treated you. It was uncalled for, and I really didn't mean any harm. I just wanted to help you since you've been struggling with your warrior training. But I see now the way I went about it was harsh. I hope you can find it in yourself to forgive me."

For a few heartbeats, Whisperpaw sat silently, expression

unreadable. "I've always liked you, Hazepaw," she started, tail-tip wiggling anxiously, "but it scared me that you'd turned your bullying onto me. It hurt worse than the lashes you gave, I think. It's hard to forgive you."

Hazepaw lowered his head, shame and a bit of frustration burning beneath his pelt. "I know. I really didn't mean any harm though, honest. You're my friend. Probably my first ever," he confessed. He glanced between the elders, daring them to chime in. Luckily none of them spoke, instead ignoring the apprentices so they could have their moment in peace. "I just want you to be a great warrior. Especially with the huge pawprints you have to fill." He shifted to face the gray tabby she-cat. Then he lowered his voice so only she could hear him. "You're better than your littermates, and I know you can be a great leader for Oceanclan someday. I thought I could help you get there, by giving you some tough training. But it wasn't my place, and I hurt you. I regret it. I just want my friend back..." All of Hazepaw's words were spoken from the heart. But there was a small seed of gain planted in his speech. Though he did want Whisperpaw back as his friend, he also needed to stay in her good graces. If he upset Whisperpaw too greatly, he'd blow his chance at ever being Oceanclan's deputy. Then all the hard work he was putting in with Sea Breeze would be for nothing.

Whisperpaw twitched her whiskers. "I understand. But it doesn't erase the mistrust I feel for you. However, I don't want to lose your friendship either... I care for you, Hazepaw. But I need some time."

"I get it..." Hazepaw deflated, the hope inside him for reconciliation nearly snuffed out. He sat in silence for a few heartbeats, letting Whisperpaw's words soak in. She still liked him, at least. Not all was lost. Hazepaw would just have to work to prove he meant the words he'd spoken. Determination blazed in his belly, making the fluffy white tom swish his tail. *I'll gain her trust back soon enough*, Hazepaw thought confidently. He gave Whisperpaw a small smile, receiving a quiet yet apprehensive purr in return from her as she went back to caring for the elders.
Not wanting to overstay his welcome, Hazepaw finally excused himself from the boat and emerged into the clearing of camp. Sandybreeze was padding nearby, her head moving in search of

something. When her gaze fell upon Hazepaw, she trotted over to him. A heartbeat later, Otterpaw joined them.

"Just the cat I was looking for! You're coming with me to lead a fishing patrol."
Fishing patrol? Excitement sprung up inside of Hazepaw at the prospect of fishing for the first time in what felt like forever.

"I'm coming too!" Otterpaw boasted, her joy nearly bursting out of her. Perhaps she was hyped up for the same reason. Or maybe she was looking forward to spending time with her aunt.
Whisperpaw suddenly emerged from the elder's den; ears pricked, probably because of the tone in Otterpaw's voice.

"Can I...come too? Luckysong taught me a little about fishing," she mewed, glancing at Hazepaw apprehensively. She looked as though she were giving the request a second thought, regret on her features. Otterpaw brushed her tail along her friend's flank to reassure her.

Sandybreeze gave her whiskers a twitch. "I don't see why not. More paws catch more fish, after all. Come along, you three. Let's meet with the rest of the patrol."

The Oceanclan deputy led them to a pole at the edge of the Twoleg Settlement Bridge, towards the awaiting warriors. Urchinpaw was the first cat Hazepaw spotted. More importantly Troutwhisker, Seaweedfang, and Ripplesnout were there, too. They were the best fishers in Oceanclan. Surely the patrol would be bringing home lots of prey today! Hazepaw smirked with excitement, kneading his paws into the sand beneath them in anticipation.

"Looks like all of 'em," Ripplesnout, noted. Sandybreeze nodded in agreement then flicked her ear, prompting the patrol to head across the beach. A strong breeze ruffled their pelts as they walked, the chill making Hazepaw shiver. Though every day Greenleaf drew closer, Newleaf kept its grip on the world with stone strengthened claws. Hazepaw wished to feel warmth soak his fur at last, in the way cats described the hottest season doing. Then it would make swimming and fishing in the ocean more fun. Though the sand felt nice and hot, with the sun beating down upon the shore. If they'd

had a moment, Hazepaw would have rolled around on it to heat him up. He knew once he got in the water the world would feel cold again. Maybe he could do it later, to prepare himself for swimming. For now, though, Hazepaw kept pace with his clanmates, straining his ears to catch the sound of the nearing ocean. As they padded along, Urchinpaw, Otterpaw, and Whisperpaw chatted idly beside him.

"Do you think we'll see any Twolegs while we're out here..?" Whisperpaw wondered, voice quivering a little.

"Doubt it." Urchinpaw shook out his pelt. "It's still too cold for them. Without any fur, the ocean is too much for them to handle in Newleaf."

"But look." Otterpaw gestured to some prints in the sand, leading up to then away from the shoreline. They were close in shape to Twoleg's lower paws. Yet there were none of the creatures in sight. "Appears two were here."

"Well they're long gone now," Minnowjaw assured in with his muzzle in the air. "They musta realized they weren't cut out for the beach beyond the Twoleg Madness season."

"And thank the Moon for that! We don't want those bumbling beasts around when we hunt. They'll scare off all the fish with their splashing," added Troutwhisker. The other cats nodded in agreement, pressing forward on their journey.
Hazepaw smelled it before he saw it. The crisp, salty, tangy scent of the ocean was a glorious and unmistakable aroma. It made his mouth water. Energy surged through the fluffy white tom's limbs as he restrained himself from rushing to the seafoam. But Otterpaw beat him to the lunge, bursting away from the patrol to chase the strangely docile waves nearby.

"Race you to the water!" She called over her shoulder to her denmates.
A darkness loomed within this part of ocean--something eerie that Hazepaw had never experienced before. In a flash, Sandybreeze rushed after her niece, rounding her to block the way just before Otterpaw managed to touch the water. She ushered the brown she-

cat back to the approaching patrol, receiving an earful upon return.

"Are you fish-brained?" Snapped Minnowjaw.

"What made you think you could just run over and dive into the ocean like that? Have you no sense!?" Ripplesnout spat. Otterpaw lowered her ears in shame.

"Pipe down! These 'Paws still have a lot to learn about ocean safety," Sandybreeze growled at the warriors. Then her attention returned to Otterpaw. "From now on, be wary of calm, dark water. And never try to swim in it," she warned her niece more placidly. She didn't seem as angered by Otterpaw's actions as the other warriors.

"But why?" Asked Otterpaw, voice a bit wobbly. Whisperpaw moved to flank her.

"The ocean will pull you in and drown you, if you do. It's because of its jealousy, you see. The ocean is in love with the Moon. But they separated long ago. And so, sometimes the ocean takes out its resentment on us."
Hazepaw recalled fables about Silverpelt, sometimes referred to simply as Moon. She was a mother-like figure to cats in most. While in some, she was a stubborn, vain character who only focused on herself. But she was an important figure in the Land's Star's history. Especially for Oceanclan. She was the reason cats existed in the first place.

"But why would it do that?" Urchinpaw lashed his tail with curiosity. "And why do we swim in the ocean if it just wants to kill us?"

"Because the ocean is part of our history. Just as it is part of Silverpelt's. And though it can be a great threat; the ocean is also our greatest ally. Swimming in it builds muscle, making us stronger than the other clans. It also provides us an endless supply of food, so that we never go hungry," Sandybreeze explained. "The ocean loves us as much as the Moon does. It just allows its resentment to cloud its judgment at times. That's why the water is dark, when the ocean aims to suck a cat under."

Hazepaw let out a thoughtful hum. This sounded like something Moonpaw would be interested in. Perhaps he could find out more about the ocean and Moon, so he could have a story to bring back to her?
"Why is the ocean jealous of us?" Hazepaw questioned.

Sandybreeze let out a small purr. "Its more jealous of the partnership between the Sun and Moon than us. But because cats are a byproduct of that alliance, the ocean tends to hold resentment towards us as well."

"Can you tell me more? About the ocean and Moon?" Hazepaw's voice was hopeful. Tonight he planned to bring the story back Moonpaw, if he could.

"That's an elder's job. If you want to hear tales of ancient spirits, ask some of them later."
Hazepaw was disappointed by Sandybreeze's response. He thought by the way she was explaining things, that she would be more interested in sharing her knowledge of ancient drama. But Sandybreeze was nothing if not a serious cat. Though she believed the stories told to her in youth, she wasn't the sort to waste time discussing useless information. She'd rather teach Hazepaw the truly important lessons of life. And though Hazepaw was grateful for his mentor's teachings, he did wish she could be a little more relaxed on some occasions. Still, there was no use getting his pelt ruffled now, over her not indulging him with some tale of whimsy.
The patrol moved on from the shadowy area of the ocean, to a part of the beach where the waves acted more typically. Here the water was bright and blue. If they drew close enough, they may even be able to see to the bottom through the froth.

"You 'Paws go and fish over that way. The three of us will be fishing in the less rocky parts of the shore," Troutwhisker instructed expertly, gesturing with her smokey tail.

"How come we can't go swimming with you?" Hazepaw complained.

"Because you aren't strong enough yet to withstand the waves. You'll practice when Greenleaf comes. For now, work of perfecting your form," Sandybreeze responded, nodding her head to her

companions to lead them away. Hazepaw growled, lashing his tail in frustration. He was sure he was strong enough to fish with the warriors!

As he moved to follow after them, pain suddenly rippled through his muscles. Hazepaw cursed under his breath. Between cleaning up the temporary camp, the journey back home, and training with Sea Breeze in dreams last night, Hazepaw's body had grown a bit achey and sore. The walk to the beach hadn't helped his muscles much either. If he hadn't been pushing himself so hard, he'd be strong enough now to prove his mentor wrong. Instead, he conceded to his own limits and followed Otterpaw, Whisperpaw, and Urchinpaw over to the rocks.

The waves crashed rhythmically against them, spraying the boulders with the momentum. The water was at the perfect level, deep enough to be inviting to fish, but low enough that it would not consume the rocks with each rolling wave. Hazepaw was the first to climb onto one of the slippery stones, beckoning his companions with a swish of his tail. Otterpaw jumped to join Hazepaw on his rock. While Urchinpaw settled on one of his own closeby. Whisperpaw perched on a stone between them.

In the ocean surrounding the rocks, little fish swam with the current; weaving in and out of crevices, in-between seaweed and other little plants. They had no idea that they were being hunted. The conditions were perfect for a successful catch.

Otterpaw was the first to give it a try, her paw raised and poised for an attack. Hazepaw observed her with delayed breath as the brown molly's lightning fast reflexes led to her successful strike. A pretty silver fish flopped on the stone between them, it's mouth gaped and shut as it tried to take breath from the air. Hazepaw grabbed it by its gills and bit hard, tasting it's delicious juices gush over his tongue. He had to resist the urge to bite down harder, realizing now he hadn't eaten before they went out today. As he sat up with a lick of his lips, the fluffy white tom wished he could take this fish as his own. But on a hunting patrol, warriors were not permitted to eat. So he slid the now deceased creature aside, taking his turn to make a catch.

Hazepaw watched the water carefully, narrowing his eyes to focus on the scaly critters below. As another paddled closer to the rock, Hazepaw struck out, hooking the fish and pulling it to the surface. This time Otterpaw made the killing blow, thanking Starclan quietly

for the prey before casting a paw out again.
The two apprentices took turns like this for a while, successfully snagging quite a few fish between them by the time Hazepaw turned to check on Urchinpaw.
The wiry black tom appeared to be struggling. Though his pelt was moist and his fishing paw soggy, not a single fish was set beside him on his rock. His face was twisted in frustration as he glared down at the water, before he once again tried to scoop something. This time he managed to pull up a fish, but he fumbled as the creature flopped for it's life. It managed to flip out of Urchinpaw's paws in the air, hurtling back down to the water. Urchinpaw scrambled to grab it, before it inevitably escaped back into the deep blue depts. With a splash, Hazepaw watched as the fish disappeared beneath the current. Urchinpaw cursed to himself and thrashed his tail, muttering something about giving up already. Whisperpaw giggled at his attempt.
Hazepaw and Otterpaw exchanged a look. Then he stood, leaping onto the stone beside Urchinpaw.

"Let me show you how it's done," Hazepaw offered, shaping his paw like a hook with claws extended. He flicked an ear, urging Urchinpaw to copy. Urchinpaw did as instructed, mimicking his friend's moves.
"I saw you leaning while you hunted. The fish will get spooked by your shadow if you do that. Even if they just see your fur, it'll startle them," Hazepaw explained.

"I saw you do it, though," Urchinpaw growled.

"That's 'cause fish are too stupid to differentiate objects from their colors. They see white and think clouds. Black, however? Means predator."
Urchinpaw let out a chirp of understanding and nodded.

"Kinkfoot taught me darker colored cats have to be more strategic. Instead of striking the closest fish to your rock, you have to judge which fish will swim into your range," Otterpaw chimed in. She motioned for Hazepaw to switch places with her, then jumped to Urchinpaw's side. "Watch me." Otterpaw demonstrated what she had spoken of, stalking a rather large blue-ish colored fish as it swam into her reach. Carefully Otterpaw eyed the creature until she

determined it was close enough to scoop. With an expert paw, Otterpaw pulled the fish out of the sea, leaving it beside Urchinpaw to kill. The wiry black tom gladly nipped it, then sat upright to try the technique for himself. It took two more tries before he was successful. But after finally getting a fish of his own, Urchinpaw seemed to find his groove.
The four apprentices together managed to catch a sizable pile of ocean prey. Otterpaw had caught the biggest; the blue-ish one from her demonstration. Though Whisperpaw had surprised them all with the bonefish she'd snagged. Their fishing patrol would surely be pleased to see how successful they'd all been.
Though their next challenge was figuring out how to carry all their fish to the warriors.

"I saw some Twoleg netting float past not long ago," Urchinpaw mentioned, running off to track it down. Hazepaw, Whisperpaw, and Otterpaw followed.

"Oh sweet," Hazepaw mewed.

"Well done!" Otterpaw commended once the oddly weaved vines had been found. The net was partially washed on the sand, making it easier for them to grab. Hazepaw stepped into the water to untangle the rest from the rocks, dipping his muzzle under the ocean's surface. As he did so, he felt a searing pain on his nose and shot up with a screech. A crab had clamped down on him with it's claw. Otterpaw and Urchinpaw laughed as he struggled for freedom, while Whisperpaw watched on with concern. Though the cackles of the others were infectious enough to have her stifling some giggles of her own.
Hazepaw pawed at the brownish-red crustacean, trying to force it to release it's grip. Instead the crab pinched harder. Hazepaw laid down and shook his head, trying to pull it off himself with both paws. As he yanked, a rock fell suddenly on the creature; once, then twice, cracking open it's shell and killing it. Hazepaw looked up. Whisperpaw was holding the rock between her paws, glaring down at the crab to ensure it was dead. Hazepaw sat up.

"Uh, thanks," he mumbled.

"Don't mention it," was all that the gray tabby said in response,

turning away to drag the net and crab back to their prey with Urchinpaw.
Otterpaw came over to Hazepaw to lick the pain away from his nose. She purred, too, as if trying to soothe him. Heat instantly rose in Hazepaw's pelt from the gesture.
It was sweet; almost too sweet for someone like Otterpaw. Moonpaw was more likely to show him such a kindness, especially after they'd spend some time apart. Maybe that was how Otterpaw felt too. Since she hadn't been speaking with Hazepaw for nearly a half moon, perhaps she felt a need to make up for it; by showing she still cared. Or maybe she was making up for the curtness of Whisperpaw. Still, Hazepaw wasn't going to question her actions, even if they did confuse him a little. *This is... nice*, Hazepaw thought. Then after a few moments he jerked away, too flustered to handle anymore.

"Feel better?" Otterpaw tilted her head. Her eyes sparkled in the sunlight, and Hazepaw thought he felt his heart skip a beat.

"Ye..yeah," he murmured. Then he turned with a rush, motioning for Otterpaw to follow back to the rocks.
The warriors were waiting for them upon their return. They were already singing the praises of Whisperpaw as she showed off the crab she'd killed, and the net Urchinpaw found. Sandybreeze approached Hazepaw, commending him on his efforts.

"I can smell which of the fish you caught. You've learned well, it seems," she praised. "And that also goes for you three," she added then whisked her tail. "Though, Urchinpaw, I will have to speak with Silverdrop about giving you another lesson or two."
Urchinpaw lowered his head respectfully, grumbling in frustration under his breath. Hazepaw nudged him with a shoulder to warn him to be quiet. Otterpaw moved to touch noses with her aunt then sat beside Whisperpaw who was putting fish into the net.

"We best be heading home, before the sun starts to make the fish rot," Troutwhisker grunted. Seaweedfang nodded in agreement, helping load prey into the net.

On the trek back to camp, Hazepaw reflected on the day. Pride puffed his his chest from a job well done. His stomach growled as

he anticipated the tasty meal he'd get to enjoy at home soon. And his mind began to wander to the fun he had with his friends.
A longing soon grew in his chest; a familiar feeling he gained only when he missed Moonpaw. Hazepaw wished she could have been there with him, fishing and laughing along with his denmates. Would she have soothed him after the crab attacked him, like Otterpaw had? Or killed the stupid thing, like Whisperpaw? Hazepaw bet today would have been even more enjoyable if he'd gotten to spend it with her. He'd begun to feel this way a lot, whenever he'd spend a couple of days away from her. And now, with the entirety of Oceanclan's territory between them, Hazepaw wished even more that they were in the same clan. It was in that moment he suddenly decided; *I need to see Moonpaw again.*

Chapter 23

The moon washed the beach in silver light, glistening white sand churning under pawpads with every step. Hazepaw moved silently across the open stretch of land, hoping not to be spotted by the returning sundown patrol. He was on his way to meet Moonpaw. Eagerness put urgency in his pace. He was excited to see the beautiful she-cat after spending some time apart.

The more Hazepaw thought about catching her scent--of fresh green leaves and earthy plant mulch--the more nostalgic he felt. And it'd only been two nights since they last saw each other. Perhaps a small portion of it was from missing the Forest Patch, and all he'd come to enjoy about it. But Hazepaw knew deep down his emotions were linked purely to Moonpaw.

What had she been up to since they last met, he wondered. He couldn't wait to tell her about the move, and the day he had fishing with his friends. Moonpaw would be intrigued to hear what little Hazepaw had heard about Silverpelt and her relationship with the ocean, too. Excitement prickled every fur strand on Hazepaw's pelt as he caught the line of trees on the horizon. He sped up to a steady gate, until he padded right alongside of the edge of the forest. Leaves rustled in the steady breeze that had picked up come evening. They shivered and swayed, pointing in the direction Hazepaw was going. Perhaps it was a sign from Starclan itself that visiting tonight was a good idea. The thought only served to thrill Hazepaw more.

Soon a jagged, unorganized cluster of rocks came within sight, warning the fluffy white tom to rely on his senses and take things slow.

Hazepaw came to a halt three bear-lengths from the Rubble Path, parting his jaws to taste the air. He drew the smells of the woods over his scent glands, searching deeply for anything familiar in the air. At first there was nothing. But then the wind shifted, and Hazepaw recognized something. *Moonpaw!* His heart leaped as he waited in place, listening for the soft mew of his friend calling him over.

"...Are you out there?" He heard Moonpaw mew, her voice hushed and laced with what Hazepaw swore was sadness and hesitation. Hazepaw trilled, walking toward the silver and white she-cat's line of sight.

"Hey," he purred, smiling up at her. He paused near the base of the Rubble Path, front paws placed upon a stones. It was from this distance he noticed a look on Moonpaw's face; something negative melting into relief.

"Hazepaw..!" Moonpaw breathed, practically flying down the cluster of rocks to reach him. "I thought you wouldn't show up again!"

"Why wouldn't I? I don't plan on missing our meetings anytime soon."

"But you didn't show up to the Gathering," she pointed out. "I was worried you wouldn't come tonight either."

"Well I'm here," Hazepaw proclaimed with a purr. "I had something important to take care of at camp that night."

"But you couldn't have come yesterday instead to tell me?"

"I didn't think you'd come out last night. We usually meet every other."

"Right," she agreed. "But with you missing out on the Gathering, I thought you'd want to make up for it. I'd hoped...I really wish you would have." There was a quiver in her mew, a tone he hadn't heard since Moonpaw had lost her brother. Had something important happened?

"I'm sorry." He moved to sit with her, wrapping his fluffy tail around her body to pull her in. "You needed me, didn't you?"

Moonpaw gave a nod. "Something terrible happened...." her expression looked haunted. Hazepaw began to groom between her ears to encourage her to talk about it. "...One of my denmates was struck and killed by a monster during our assessment yesterday. I...I was almost attacked too."

Shock struck through his pelt, straight to his heart. Hazepaw pulled back. "You...what? Stars, Moonpaw! I had no idea...! I..." he trailed off, flashes of Moonpaw as the victim of a car attack filling his mind. Her long silver fur splayed on the black stone, splattered in blood. Her body torn apart and crushed by the strength of the monster. Her face contorted in agony and fear. The hypothetical after image was too much to handle.
Hazepaw immediately wrapped his forepaws around Moonpaw, pulling the molly closer to himself. He trembled, trying to rid himself of the sudden fear that'd overcome him. He'd almost lost her, and he was nowhere to be found when it happened! Guilt started to eat at Hazepaw's belly, but he tried push it away.
What could he have done, if something did happen? They lived clans apart, and now an entire territory-length. He might not have known Moonpaw was gone until the next Gathering. Then he would feel even worse, missing out on meeting her the past two days. Hazepaw would never forgive himself if that happened. He knew it was a part of life--the risk of living wild and free, and being a warrior--but the thought of his dear friend dying was just....
Hazepaw shook his head, dipping it to bury his face in Moonpaw's fur. It was at that moment Hazepaw realized he felt something stronger for Moonpaw than he'd ever felt for anyone else. But he still couldn't place what the feeling was. All he knew was that he cared for this she-cat deeply, and he didn't want any terrible harm to come to her.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here for you," he whispered, nuzzling her, "but I'm here now. And I'll keep being here from now on. I won't skip any of our meetings ever again, if I can help it."

"You mean it..?" Moonpaw asked.
Hazepaw nodded, finding a lump had formed in his throat.
Moonpaw sighed, "Thank you....I really missed you."

"I missed you too," Hazepaw mewed softly, pulling back to look at her. He studied her features for a few heartbeats, searching for any signs of distress or anguish. Yet none were reflected on her pretty silver face. Only relief. Hazepaw sighed, bringing himself closer to the pretty she-cat once more.
They sat quietly together like this for a while. The only sounds

echoing around them were the swaying trees and their soft purrs. It was peaceful. For a few moments, the two of them could pretend everything was alright. But Hazepaw knew deep down it wasn't. "...Your clan's been losing so many apprentices lately. How is anybody able to stand it?" He piped after some thought.

Moonpaw perked her ears. "I was talking to Badgerface about it this morning, actually. He said it's to be expected in any apprentice class. Treeclan is good at keeping its kits safe. But once they leave the safety of camp....their survival rate drops significantly. " she explained. Moonpaw looked away, as if she were ashamed to divulge such information. Hazepaw doubted it was a Treeclan secret, though. Blazestar would have to announce the deaths at Gatherings. Even if it was a secret, it must have been an open one. "My clanmate, Fogpaw, has experienced it personally. Every cat in his apprentice class has died, except for him."

"I thought he had those two she-cats in his class who are still around?" Hazepaw recalled. He'd seen three similarly aged Treeclan apprentices at one of the recent Gatherings. He remembered Fogpaw, for his striking smoke gray coat and large stature. And the she-cats had been acting too obnoxious to ignore.

"You mean Meadowpaw and Emberpaw? They came to Treeclan a few moons ago. They were rogues. Without them, Fogpaw would be alone."

"So even his littermates...?" Hazepaw trailed off.

Moonpaw nodded. "One starved in Leafbare. The other caught greencough. That's what he said, at least."

"No wonder why Treeclan's always having so many kittens," Hazepaw muttered, moreso to himself.

"Badgerface said its Starclan's way of balancing things out." Moonpaw lowered her head, voice soft.

Hazepaw growled. "It's cruel."

Moonpaw gave a small shrug. "It's life...." That sounded more like

something he would say, not sweet caring Moonpaw! The weight of her words really spoke of the effect her clanmate's death was having on her.
Hazepaw snarled, lashing his tail. *Silverpelt really is selfish, then,* he realized, recalling what he'd heard from the tale of The Moon and Ocean earlier in the day.

"If it's all the same to you," Moonpaw cut into his thoughts, "I'd rather not talk about this subject anymore..."

"Of course," Hazepaw agreed, nuzzling her. Silence fell over the apprentices once again, but it felt a little uncomfortable now. There had to be something to brighten their spirits back up.
Hazepaw thought for a while, grooming Moonpaw as he did. Moonpaw leaned into him, smelling so sweetly of tree sap and forest mulch. Her scent almost put him into a trance. She was so alluring, so wonderful. As his focus honed in on her sweet smell, a plan finally popped into his mind. Something to lift the mood off of the morbid topics they'd found themselves discussing, Hazepaw nudged Moonpaw to run an idea by her.

"Hey, how about you teach me something from Treeclan?" He suggested.

Moonpaw hummed. "Like what?"

"Liiiike....How to climb trees?" He proposed, hopeful. It was a bizarre request, he knew. But the ability could probably serve to be useful someday. *Utilize the skills of your enemies when you can,* he'd remembered Sea Breeze telling him before.

Moonpaw perked with surprise. "You mean you don't know how?"

Hazepaw snorted playfully. That wasn't a question he expected her to ask. He thought she'd question why he'd want to learn, or how it would even benefit him. "Do I look like I've ever set a claw into a tree before? I live by the ocean, remember?"

"But you were in the Forest Patch for a moon! I'm shocked that your clan didn't try using the trees to their advantage."

"Half of my clan is too lazy. The other half have too much pride to try."

"Do you not?" Moonpaw teased.

Hazepaw puffed out his chest. "I've got plenty of pride! But I also know climbing would be smart to learn. So, will you teach me?"

Humming again in contemplation, Moonpaw rose to her paws. "Alright," she agreed, beckoning the white apprentice to follow her with a swish of her tail.
The pair picked their way up the Rubble Path, and into the forest. They'd done it before, during their other meetings, but Moonpaw seemed more uneasy inviting him into the territory this time. Her pawsteps were more cautious the further they tredded past Treeclan's border.

"Um, before we begin, would you roll in this mint patch?" She requested after a pause, pointing to a cluster of plants closeby with her tail.

Hazepaw drew back his top lip in distaste. "Why would I do that?"

"To disguise your scent," Moonpaw clarified. "Flamepath and Thrushmask taught my apprentice class about it today. I also think its a good idea, because Blazestar mentioned smelling Oceanclan across the border during the Gathering."

"Do you think anyone caught my scent?"

Moonpaw twitched her ears. "Probably. So, we have to be more careful now."

Hazepaw gulped, looking at the mint patch as if it were filled with searing thorns. At least he hoped it wasn't filled with thorns. He didn't know much about plants. But Hazepaw doubted Moonpaw would do anything to hurt him. She wasn't the type to pull a mean prank, either. That would be something Otterpaw might do. So, Hazepaw flopped himself between the mint leaves, rolling around to cover his entire body. The smell was incredibly strong, especially when laying in the plant itself. Hazepaw could only describe the

scent as cold, and sharp. But it wasn't nasty, just very unpleasant. When he figured he'd covered himself enough, Hazepaw rose to his paws and followed Moonpaw over a thick group of oak trees. He tilted his head back, trying to see how far up they went. The oaks had to be at least a ten bear-lengths high. *How in Starclan can Treeclan stand to be that high up?* He wondered, his nervousness growing. Regret began to tingle in his paws. He felt like retracting his climbling request and running back to the familiarity of the beach. But he didn't want to embarrass himself in front of Moonpaw. Besides, he knew Sea Breeze would chastise him for running away from a challenge if he did. So, he put on a brave face, awaiting Moonpaw's instructions.

Moonpaw looked thoughtful. As if she were trying to figure out the best words to say. She walked up to one of the smaller trees in the area with a *prrp* of excitement. "This should be an easy one for you," she told Hazepaw, lifting a paw and placing it onto the oak's trunk. "Do what I do, ok?"

Hazepaw moved to stand beside her, placing his paw on the tree like she had. He was a fast learner, surely following in Moonpaw's pawprints would allow him to pick up the necessary skills. Hazepaw flexed his claws, fitting them into the ridges of the wood. He felt how good of a foothold they would provide and felt calmer knowing he wouldn't easily slip.

Moonpaw took a pace back after a heartbeat, crouching down. Her focus pointed towards their selected tree before she suddenly sprang onto it. All four paws gripped the bark in front of her. The Treeclan apprentice clung to it like a squirrel, lifting one paw then the next as she made her ascent into the branches above. A few scraps of wood chipped and sprinkled onto Hazepaw pelt as he observed her technique.

"You want to dig your claws into the grooves of the bark. But not too deep, or it'll be hard to move," Moonpaw instructed as she climbed.

Seems simple enough, Hazepaw figured, readying himself to follow her up.

Stepping back to gather his haunches, Hazepaw leaped at the tree from beneath Moonpaw, clinging to it with forepaws spread wide. He felt so awkward clinging to the trunk and felt a slight burning from how far out his limbs strentched.

By this point, Moonpaw had already made her way to a branch,

observing him from above. She looked like a Starclan warrior with the moonlight sparkling on her fur. Hazepaw felt in awe, but the sensation quickly dissipated with her teasing laughter.

"You look like a kit!" she commented, cheeks lifted with her beautiful smile. "Only kittens cling to trees the way you are!"

Embarrassment began to burn beneath his pelt. "Shut up!" Hazepaw hissed. "I don't know what I'm doing!"

"I can tell," Moonpaw giggled, jumping down from the tree branch back into the undergrowth below. "Come down, let's try this together," she requested.
Hazepaw moved his legs awkwardly, trying to figure out how to get down from where he was. Should he climb the way he'd gotten up?
"Just let go and land on your paws. You're not too far up, you should be safe, " Moonpaw reassure him. Hazepaw sighed to quell his nerves, trusting the pretty silver she-cat. He released his grip, falling to the earth below. His legs buned slightly upon impact, but otherwise he was unscathed.
Moonpaw padded up to him and pressed her side against his.
"Great try," she praised, "this time follow my moves more closely. We'll climb at the same time."
Hazepaw nodded, following her a pace back from the small oak. Moonpaw dropped once again into a crouch, springing from her place onto the tree bark. Hazepaw noticed how closely inward she kept her limbs. It was the same position one would hold while stalking on the ground. Hazepaw copied her, landing on the tree a mouse-length beside her. He dug his claws into the tree's grooves trying not to go too deep. But from the way he'd landed he felt like he'd slip off. Moonpaw didn't seem worried, though.
"You've got it, now move one paw after another and pull up. Dominate side first." She took a pace or two upwards. Her left paws pulled her higher before the right followed along. Hazepaw mimicked her movements. "Keep your eyes on the bark just above you, so you know where your next foothold will be. Your focus should always remain on the tree, so you won't get dizzy or scared from the height."
Hazepaw took in her words, putting them to practice. He paid close attention to where the best place to put his paws was, hoisting

himself higher and higher into the tree. Moonpaw was beside him the whole way.
Hazepaw's pawpads began to sting from the rough texture of the tree. But they were nearly to the top. As they closed in on a branch, Moonpaw extended a paw towards it, pulling herself onto it with a twist of her body and a good pull. Hazepaw copied with his own branch, his back paws slipping slightly as he pulled himself onto it. A slight shock of panic ran through him, before he finally managed to steady himself on the thick tree's limb. He chuckled slightly, if only as an outlet to release his anxiety. Moonpaw seemed to think he did it out of confidence.

"There you go!" She cheered. "Soon you'll be an expert at this!"

"Heh, you think so?" Hazepaw mused. Moonpaw shimmied across the tree's trunk to get onto the branch he sat upon. She pressed her shoulder into his affectionately, rubbing the side of her muzzle on his.

"Definitely," she purred. "You ready for the next step?"

"Next step?" Hazepaw echoed. They were already in the tree, what else was there to do?

Moonpaw carefully moved past him, balancing her way towards the end of the branch. She looked dainty doing it, her tail held in the air for balance. "The next step is learning how to cross!" She meowed, crouching. With a strong leap, she hurdled herself over to the branch of an adjacent tree. The limb shook with the force of her weight, yet Moonpaw appeared unaffected by the motion.
Hazepaw felt unsure after watching what she'd done. His own branch felt unsteady now with the tremble her leap had created. Hazepaw was afraid he might fall off from the movement. But after a heartbeat the branch stilled, easing the white tom a little.
Taking a deep breath, Hazepaw stalked his way across the branch, as far a he dared. He could hear the wood creaking under his heft.

"Make sure you don't go out too far. The branch may break if you do," Moonpaw warned, walking back to make way for Hazepaw to come forward.
Hazepaw heeded her cautious words, deciding where he stood

would be a safe enough launching point. He awkwardly crouched on the tree's end, before pushing off and flinging himself towards Moonpaw. Her branch bounced with his landing, so hard that Hazepaw had to hold on with all four paws. Only when it stilled again did he dare to rise to meet his friend. Moonpaw trilled at him, walking backwards to create space for him once more. Hazepaw smiled at her, then looked over his shoulder at where he'd come from. There was a rabbit-length sized gap between the two branches, and for a heartbeat Hazepaw thought about what if he hadn't jumped far enough. Would he have fallen? He shook out his pelt, trying to rid himself of the image that came along with it. Moonpaw giggled at him, rubbing her muzzle on his again.

"You did great," she praised. "We'll practice this again another night. How about we get you down from here?" She suggested. She could probably smell his fear-scent. Hazepaw nodded, following her to the new tree's trunk. "Climb down backwards, the same way you had climbing up." The silver molly demonstrated. Hazepaw was sure he could do the same. Turning to face upward on the trunk was a little awkward, though. But he managed to get himself down without any issues. Relief flooded through him when he felt soft earth beneath his pawpads. He'd never been so happy to be in the mulch than he had at that moment.

"This was fun," he chuckled. Though he hadn't realized the experience would be so frightening. Hazepaw always prided himself on his bravery. But he supposed even the greatest warriors had things to fear. Perhaps heights were one of his.

"It was! I never thought you'd want to climb with me. I can't wait to do it again," Moonpaw purred, licking his cheek. Hazepaw didn't know if he wanted to try climbing again. But Moonpaw's excitement was infectious. For her, Hazepaw decided he could put himself through that again. Probably. He chuckled, nuzzling into her. Then he paused, a familiar smell catching in his scent glands. Moonpaw's pelt prickled, clearly she'd picked up on what he had as well.

"Quick," she whisper-hissed, crouching, "you need to hi-"
But it was too late. A Treeclan warrior made their presence known to them. She emerged from the undergrowth with tail wagging and ears lowered, her ginger pelt bristling.

"What do you think you two are doing?" The warrior challenged, marching over to them. Hazepaw recognized her as Moonpaw's clanmate, Flamepath.

"We...were just...-" Moonpaw tried to justify, but the ginger warrior interjected.

"I knew something strange was going on with you," Flamepath meowed. "Emberpaw said she'd noticed some nights you'd be missing from your nest. I thought it was odd, too. But I brushed her off, because you're always such a well behaved apprentice. Now I see I should have been more suspicious!"

"Flamepath, I..I'm sorry, I-" Moonpaw tried again to explain herself.

Then she was cut off by a *mrrow* of laughter from another cat. A mysterious warrior came out from the bushes closeby, walking to Flamepath's side. "Oh, Flamey, don't be so harsh. They're startled enough as it is."

"Well I can't help being a little mad! These clumsy furballs could end up getting us all in trouble!" The ginger molly explained, her attention soley fixated on the tabby beside her. Flamepath leaned into the fluffy tom, purring softly. The warrior in turn licked her cheek, affection glowing in his eyes.

Hazepaw's pelt bushed in surprise. He knew he recognized that scent! "Minnowjaw?!" Hazepaw almost yowled his clanmate's name. "You're meeting with Flamepath!?"

Minnowjaw snorted cockily. "That's right, and I ain't ashamed of it, either!" He boasted.

"Hang on--does Blazestar know about you two?" Moonpaw questioned, standing back up. Now it was her turn to be suspicious. *Serves these fish-brains right*, Hazepaw thought with a smirk.

Flamepath groomed down her chest fur. "Uh, well, not yet..." she admitted almost bashfully. "We've been talking about how to introduce each other to our leaders, though. But we didn't expect to get caught before our relationship became public."

"We didn't catch you, though." Moonpaw tilted her head.

"You smelled us, didn't you? It was only a matter of heartbeats before you noticed us hiding out. We figured what use was there in remaining unseen?" Minnowjaw answered.

"Why are you even out here at this time of night?" Flamepath turned her attention back onto the apprentices, clearly deflecting.

"Isn't it obvious?" Hazepaw deadpanned, his tone mocking. "We're hanging out." Hazepaw thought the molly's question was stupid. How could she not see they were all here for the same reason?

"But you shouldn't be, given you're still 'Paws. Apprentices can't take mates. Especially cross-clan mates. If anyone else were to find out you'd be mocked for it. And if Blazestar or Wavestar were to know..."

"Well it's a good thing it wasn't somebody else!" Hazepaw interjected. Moonpaw nugded him with her rear flank.

"You're right," Minnowjaw agreed. "But you should try to be careful from now on."

"We are," Moonpaw mewed, ducking her head. "We tried to disguise Hazepaw's scent before we started spending time together."

"That was smart of you," Flamepath praised.

"Ah, gull-dung, look at the time," Minnowjaw prompted his mate, pointing her attention upwards. The inky blackness of the sky was starting to bloom into violet light. Dawn was approaching.

"We should get going," Flamepath agreed, wrapping her tail around him. "We'll meet again soon. Moonpaw, say goodnight and come home with me now."

"Aww, do I have to?" Moonpaw whined a little. Flamepath fixed her with a glare. Moonpaw lowered her head, then turned to press herself against Hazepaw. "I'm sorry...Please come see me soon," she whispered into his ear.

Hazepaw licked her cheek and purred. He wished the night didn't have to end already. "I will, on our usual night. I promise," he whispered in return. He pulled back to look into her soft green eyes.

"May the branches hold your weight, both of you" Flamepath meowed, guiding Moonpaw away into the forest with a whisk of her tail.

"And may Starclan light your path, my love," Minnowjaw called back in response. "Let's go, you," he nudged Hazepaw urging him to follow. Hazepaw watched after Moonpaw for a few heartbeats longer, before hurrying along with his clanmate back onto the beach.

Chapter 24

"Moonpaw." A paw nudged her, disturbing the silver and white she-cat's slumber. Moonpaw groaned, rolling over in her nest. She'd only arrived home from her meeting with Hazepaw a little while ago. At least, it felt that way. Regardless, Moonpaw wasn't ready to get up yet, settling to ignore her clanmate long enough for them to give up and leave her alone.
"I don't mean to bother you, but...Leafheart wants you to join the sunhigh patrol," the cat announced after a heartbeat.
Moonpaw growled softly to herself sitting up to glare at whoever was talking.
Beepaw was there, a surprised look on her face. Clearly she hadn't expected Moonpaw to be so grumpy. Her ears were lowered and her bright yellow eyes were round. Immediately Moonpaw felt bad for her behavior.

"Sorry," she muttered, rising from her nest. "I'll get up."

Beepaw moved to get out of her way, leading her denmate to the entrance branch and down into the clearing. Moonpaw followed behind slowly, cracking her jaws open in a yawn as she met with the other cats for the patrol. Leopardpaw and Beetlenose were waiting for them, the nearly identical toms sitting with heads high. They greeted the molly apprentices, their attention soon drawing to Galestorm, Beepaw's mentor.

"Is this everyone?" Beetlenose asked.

"No, Leafheart said she'd be along. She just needed to speak with Blazestar," Beepaw told the warrior.

"Well she'd better hurry," Galestorm gruffed. "We need to be home in time to share tongues."

Why is she already talking about sharing tongues? It's still early, Moonpaw thought, cleaning her shoulder. After a heartbeat she noticed the dappled shadows on the ground were thin. When she

looked up, the sun was near its peak in the sky. *Wait...did I sleep until nearly sunhigh!?* Moonpaw realized with slight panic and embarrassment. She washed her face, hoping no one would question her whereabouts throughout the morning.
A screech above the camp's canopy grabbed Moonpaw's attention suddenly.
Through the leaves in the trees, Moonpaw saw the shadow of a large bird of prey coast by. It cast momentary darkness over the gathered cats, revealing slanted beams of sunlight once it passed. It circled back a couple of times, and Moonpaw worried it would try and swoop down. But there were too many warriors around for it to get away with such an act. The bird made its way through the branches anyways, trying to land to observe the group and possibly strategize. But the thorny vines tied to the trees above prevented that, scaring the hawk away.
Moonpaw sighed with relief. The raptor had been trying to get into camp ever since Flamepaw was brought in to be mourned. It was getting more brazen by the day. Moonpaw worried that sometime soon the hawk would be successful in claiming a victim. Beepaw seemed to be worried of the same, her flank pressed into her mentor's. Galestorm glared up at the bird, her expression threatening.

"Don't worry, it can't get in," Beetlenose meowed nonchalantly. He ran a moistened paw over his ear. "It'd be stupid to try."

"Well, it's trying," Leopardpaw pointed out. Then he licked his lips. "It could be interesting for it to come into camp, though. I wonder what hawk tastes like?"

"You're a mouse-brain if you think the hawk swooping down would be a good thing," Galestorm growled. "Have you taught your son no sense, Beetlenose?"

"Killing it would finally rid us of its pestering, and feed the clan. I don't see why letting it get close enough wouldn't benefit us," Leopardpaw argued. *That's quite bold of him to say*, Moonpaw thought.

"It could injure or kill a vulnerable cat in the process. What you're suggesting would risk using our clanmates as live bait!"

"Settle down," Beetlenose urged, "what Leopardpaw says is not that serious. Just the moronic musings of an immature apprentice."

"Hey!" Leopardpaw snapped, offended. His spotted tail wagged and teeth bared at his father's mean remark. But it was accurate, Moonpaw had to admit.
Rustling leaves behind her caught Moonpaw's attention. She looked back to see the proud form of her mentor, Leafheart. Her eyes were sunken with fatigue, fur a bit disheveled. She'd probably been up since before the sun had risen, Moonpaw guessed. But she hadn't sought Moonpaw out to join her. At least, she hoped she hadn't. Perhaps Leafheart knew her apprentice needed rest after they'd gone on the sundown patrol together. Or maybe she was too focused on her task to have the forethought of bringing Moonpaw on the dawn patrol, too. Again, that was speculation. For all she knew, Leafheart could have come looking for her at dawn, only to find Moonpaw's nest empty. The thought of that occurrence made Moonpaw's fur prickle with guilt. Especially with Leafheart approaching her.

"Are we all set?" Leafheart asked, her attention mainly on the warriors. Her gaze hardly lingered on Moonpaw, bringing the silver she-cat some relief. *If she suspected anything funny going on, she'd surely be studying me closer*, Moonpaw knew.

"We've been ready," Galestorm confirmed, rising to her paws with a stretch.

"Then let's be off." Leafheart moved forward, prompting the patrol to follow. She barely took the time to acknowledge everyone as she normally would. But it was as Galestorm said; close to the time of sharing tongues. They needed to hurry and scent mark the border so they wouldn't all miss it.
Moonpaw followed behind Beepaw as the group climbed up the Entrance Tree. They carefully picked their way across the branches of the following trees, the limbs quivering with each pawstep and leap. Moonpaw was taken back to the night before, when she was teaching Hazepaw how to climb. She was impressed by Hazepaw's suggestion, and even moreso by him following through with the lesson. He had done well. Moonpaw was eager to see if he'd join her in the trees again sometime. But he'd looked a bit frightened

throughout the whole ordeal. So maybe he'd promised to try again just to appease her. Moonpaw didn't mind so much, but she hoped his words were true.

"Moonpaw! Have you been listening to me at all!?" Beepaw's mew abruptly cut into the silver she-cat's thoughts.

"Huh? What?"

Beepaw laughed. "I knew it, you were daydreaming!" She looked back. "You're thinking about Sunpaw, aren't you~?" The gray tabby guessed, brushing her tail-tip on Moonpaw's shoulder from ahead. Yesterday, Moonpaw had spent the entire day with Sunpaw to keep his spirits up. It must have looked like the pair were interested in each other, with how close they'd sat the whole time. And with them going out on a hunt that morning, Moonpaw could understand how Beepaw would draw that conclusion. But Sunpaw was only a close friend. Even if Moonpaw did think he was handsome. She didn't spend her time daydreaming about him, not the way she did with Hazepaw. But Beepaw didn't know that. She was always so caught up in thoughts of romance that she probably wouldn't believe Moonpaw insisting Sunpaw was only a friend.

"Something like that," was the silver molly's reply.

Beepaw let out a squeal, her fur fluffing with excitement. "I knew it! You two are starting to get awfully close. It's only a matter of time before one of you comes to me, looking for advice on how to confess to the other!"

"Sunpaw and I have always been close friends. I don't see why hanging out with him now changes things between us," Moonpaw remarked.

"It's because we're close to being warriors! Friends don't look at each other the way you two do. Especially when a cat's all grown up. Not without there being some romantic tension, at least!" Beepaw giggled.

"*You* are almost a warrior. Sunpaw and I are still a few moons away from that," Moonpaw reminded her, hoping that would snap some

sense into Beepaw. She was almost eleven moons old. In another moon or so, she'd be taking her final assessment and earning her name. Moonpaw wasn't anywhere close to that honor. Leafheart said she still had a lot to learn, and Moonpaw felt it. She still hadn't gotten the hang of fighting. Yet Beepaw seemed eager to rush her into warriorhood and shove Sunpaw onto her as a mate. Moonpaw wanted to take more time before considering anything serious like that.

"We're nearing the Saggy Tree," Beetlenose announced a bear-length ahead.

Leafheart led the patrol onto the forest floor, her white paws touching down lightly into the mulch. Moonpaw followed her mentor, nose twitching. Something caught in her senses immediately. Moonpaw parted her jaw to taste the air better, drawing salty smells over her scent glands. That was Oceanclan's odor she was detecting. But why was it so far into Treeclan's territory?
The fur along Moonpaw's spine wanted to bristle, but she forced it to stay flat. *Oh no, this is where Hazepaw and I were last night!* Moonpaw's ears folded back. Was that Minnowjaw's smell she was catching? Or Hazepaw's?
Moonpaw looked around, hoping no cat noticed her expression of panic. Luckily, all of the patrol's attention remained upon the area surrounding them. They were trying to figure out just how far the scent markers were placed into the territory.

"Did you catch it as well?" Leafheart questioned her apprentice, touching her nose to her shoulder. Moonpaw nodded hesitantly. She didn't want to admit she did, but it was hard to deny when the stench was so strong. It was fresh, too, Moonpaw realized. Perhaps it wasn't Minnowjaw or Hazepaw's after all. That was a bit of a relief. But not much, as Moonpaw realized what this meant.

"Oceanclan has tried to claim more territory." Galestorm drew her lips back in a snarl. She'd come to the same conclusion too, it seemed.

Leopardpaw sniffed the ground, following the scents around. "They marked here," he proclaimed, pointing his muzzle to a boulder. He

moved a couple fox-lengths, towards the Rubble Path. "And here." he gestured to a few trees with his tail.

"Those fox-hearts," Beetlenose growled.

"We should re-mark and then report this discovery to Blazestar," Leafheart decided, placing the first bit of scent over the enemy's. The other cats on the patrol did the same, then ascended back into the trees to hurry home.
Along the way, Wolfheart and Nightpaw had climbed up into the nearby trees. The patrol was close to the Tree Dome, so it was likely the pair had just finished training there.

"Greetings," Wolfheart called out, hopping a few branches to merge with the patrol. "Mind if we join you on the home journey?"

"Not at all," Leafheart invited with a tail swish.
Nightpaw hurried over, joining her brother's side. Her eyes glowed with excitement and pride; pelt disheveled and dotted with sand and leaf-bits. Wolfheart touched his nose to her shoulder as he passed her. There was an expression of accomplishment set on his features. He updated Leafheart and Beetlenose on his apprentice's progress as he walked near them.
Nightpaw held her head higher, a lightness in her pawsteps. Her battle training must have gone well. Moonpaw was happy to see that.
After a moment spent with her littermate, Nightpaw maneuvered her way back onto the branch Wolfheart walked. She followed him like a duckling, trying to gain back his attention. Wolfheart gave it to her easily, involving Nightpaw in his conversation with the warriors.
When she'd first become an apprentice, Moonpaw had worried Nightpaw wouldn't like Wolfheart as a mentor. Not the way Moonpaw would have, if she'd gotten her father as her teacher. But Nightpaw seemed to love Wolfheart, maybe even more than her own father, Beetlenose. She spoke of Wolfheart highly, and always seemed happy after their training sessions together. Not much else put a smile on Nightpaw's face. Moonpaw found it sweet.

As the group arrived in Treeclan's camp, Leafheart and Beetlenose went ahead to Blazestar's den to tell him what they had discovered.

Meanwhile, Moonpaw made her way to the center of camp. There, she sat waiting, knowing that a clan meeting would be called any moment. And she was right. Blazestar made his way to the top of his den and yowled;

"Let all cats old enough to climb through the trees, gather here beneath the Great Stump for a clan meeting!"
The rest of the clan started to come together, sitting on all sides of Moonpaw.

"After sunhigh, you and I are doing some battle training." Moonpaw heard Leafheart murmur into her ear as she settled behind her. Moonpaw gave a nod of acknowledgement, returning her attention ahead once Blazestar worked on settling the crowd.

"There are several announcements to be made this afternoon, before we all commence with eating and sharing tongues. Firstly, I'd like to call Thrushmask forward. Thrushmask?"
The she-cat in question padded to the front of the crowd, her head held high. Spruceleap moved to join her, their tails intertwining as they met. Moonpaw hardly recalled Thrushmask showing public displays of affection to any cat before, besides her littermate. To be sitting in front of the whole clan with her tail wrapped around an unrelated tom's seemed so odd for her. Did this mean Thrushmask and Spruceleap were mates?

"Would you like to share your news with the clan?" Blazestar prompted.

"We're expecting kits!" Thrushmask announced proudly. Spruceleap nuzzled her cheek. Well that certainly confirmed things! Though Moonpaw couldn't help but wonder for a brief moment if this was some way of coping for Thrushmask. Had she decided to have kits now, because she'd lost her apprentice, Flamepaw? *Is it even possible to get pregnant in two days*? Moonpaw pondered. That wasn't a lesson her apprentice class had learned yet.

"They're the first of the year!" Mothsong called out from her spot beside the medicine den. She looked more overjoyed about the news than Thrushmask did.

"Don't think you'll be getting me into the nursery until I'm ready to pop, though," Thrushmask warned.

Silverhawk snorted playfully two fox-lengths away. "You'll join us when I tell you it's time."

"I'll join when I'm good and ready!" Thrushmask shot back.

"Will that be before or after you end up kitting while on a patrol?" Her sister, Sagetail, teased from the back of the crowd.

"Alright that's enough, all of you," Blazestar decided, dismissing the parents-to-be. "Thank you, Thrushmask, for sharing your good news. But now that we've gotten the pleasantries out of the way, it's time I tell you all the true reason I've called this meeting." Blazestar's expression shifted to something more serious, something bitter and angry. "Earlier, one of our patrols noticed Oceanclan scents across the borders. Not for the first time, either, as most of you are aware by now. It was all over the Rubble Path. Some of the scent even made its way along the cliff, close by the Saggy Tree. And even partway into the forest."
Flamepath seemed a little more disturbed by the news than most. All of Treeclan's attention remained upon their leader, though. The ginger she-cat's gaze flitted onto Moonpaw, as if to say; *Did you tell Blazestar about Minnowjaw and I?*
No, Moonpaw shook her head in answer. Her attention returned to Blazestar. If he knew anything, he'd probably have called her out. Or at least he'd be staring her down.
If Moonpaw had told anyone about them, then she'd have to explain what she was doing near Oceanclan's border so late at night, too. Then her secret meetings with Hazepaw would be revealed, and all four cats would be in great trouble. Moonpaw would never do anything like that. Flamepath seemed to realize quickly and relaxed. As much as she could, at least, given the circumstances. There was still the matter that Hazepaw and Minnowjaw's scents had been picked up in Treeclan territory before; even if the scent the patrol had caught wasn't theirs this time.

"What do you propose we do about it, Blazestar?" Senior warrior, Oakfur, asked.

"We're going to teach Oceanclan a lesson, naturally. They want to try and push our border? They'll have to go through our warriors first. This evening as the sun sets, I will send two groups to the Oceanclan border to fight off their patrol."

"Isn't that excessive?" Violetshade, Beepaw's older sister, interrupted.

Treeclan's leader thrashed his tail. "With them setting scent marks higher up Rubble Path? Definitely not. Oceanclan will anticipate a fight. Their patrol will be larger, and reinforcements probably won't be too far behind in case of trouble. A battle is inevitable." Blazestar lifted a paw to groom as he continued; "I want all cats prepared for when the plans are set later today. Senior warriors are to meet in my den after sharing tongues. In the meantime, I've kept you all long enough. This meeting is dismissed."

With that, Moonpaw padded to the fresh-kill pile to grab something to eat and share with Badgerface. She picked out a juicey bluejay, carrying it quickly towards the elders den. She didn't have much time to eat and greet her clanmates before training began. She mewed "hellos" around the feathers of her bird as she passed.
Along her way, Moonpaw spotted Sunpaw settling down into a bright patch of sunlight. He laid on his belly, back legs flat on either side, front paws tucked beneath his chest, and his chin flat against the leaf coated soil. He was alone, and looked utterly miserable. Moonpaw had taken to distracting Sunpaw when she could, but in the moments when some cat wasn't occupying his time, he allowed sadness to take him over. It was unlike Sunpaw to be so dreary. But in this moment he looked entirely pitiful.

Moonpaw placed her bluejay down by her paws. "Sunpaw? Are you alright?" She checked.
Sunpaw let out a noncommittal noise.
"Sunpaw...?"

"This was Flamepaw's favorite sunning spot," he murmured, ignoring Moonpaw's intial question. "He loved laying here at sunhigh most."

"Oh..." Moonpaw abandoned her prey momentarily to put herself

beside him. "With Skunkpaw?"
Sunpaw hummed in agreement.
"...They weren't the most social of cats, were they? That pair was more content to allow the clan to come to them, if anyone liked."

"That's because Skunkpaw was usually too lazy to move," Sunpaw commented, the smallest of smiles pulling up the corners of his lips.

Moonpaw purred softly in amusement. Her heart ached at the memory of her missing brother. "Flamepaw could have easily let Skunkpaw be alone, though. But they were too close for him to think of doing that."

"No, Flamepaw just wasn't willing to give up his favorite sunning spot that easily. He was stubborn." Sunpaw gruffed. But there was no frustration in his mew. Only admiration.

"But still, he let Skunkpaw hog most of the light," Moonpaw pointed out, swishing her tail-tip back, then forth.

"He was selfless, too." Sunpaw sighed. "I miss him..."

"I know." Moonpaw leaned against him. "I miss Flamepaw too."

"Do you think he's watching us? From Starclan?" Sunpaw asked suddenly, looking up at Moonpaw with such hopeful eyes.

She smiled at him. "I'm sure he's been watching us since he's joined. But right now, I'd bet he's sharing tongues with Treeclan ancestors for their sunhigh. And you should be doing the same down here." Moonpaw crouched down to be at his level, her voice dropping to barely above a whisper. "You know Flamepaw wouldn't want you laying around moping over him. He'd want you taking care of your family, and your clan. But most importantly, he'd want you taking care of yourself. Why not grab a bite to eat with Blackpaw? I'll catch up with you later?"

Sunpaw lay in silence, his tongue running over his lips as if he were mulling over the idea. "...Alright," he agreed, standing with a tippy-toe stretch.
Moonpaw rose with him, the pair shaking out their pelts before

going their separate ways. Moonpaw grabbed her bluejay again, looking over her shoulder to see Sunpaw bounding off through the crowd until he met with Blackpaw. Moonpaw smiled around her prey, finishing the short distance left to the elder's den and crawled beneath the wooden structure.

Chapter 25

As the sun stalked away from its highest position in the sky, Leafheart came to fetch her apprentice. She poked her head into the entrance of the retired warriors' lair, searching for Moonpaw.

"Greetings, is Moonpaw here?" She checked, spotting Moonpaw wrapped up in Badgerface's paws by the back of the den. They were just finishing sharing tongues for the afternoon.

"Oh hello, chipmunk. Yes, she's here," Daisypetal--who sat close to the pair--greeted her union-daughter, her mew crackly but sweet.

Moonpaw rose to her paws to approach Leafheart, knowing it was time to train like she'd promised earlier. "Thank you for telling me another great story, Daisypetal! And Badgerface, the bluejay we shared was delicious!" She dipped her head in appreciation to the elders.

"Anytime, Moonpaw," Badgerface blinked affectionately.

"You know it's always a pleasure, dear," Daisypetal purred. "Next time you come, maybe I can tell you about how that one managed to win the heart of my son, Blazestar." She tilted her head towards Leafheart with a mischievous smirk.

Leafheart's ears pricked. She immediately began to lick down her chest fur, as if embarrassed about Daisypetal's offer. Moonpaw let out a tiny *mrrow* of amusement, muffling it with a paw. She pretended to groom, hopefully sparing her mentor from further fluster.

Leafheart gave a playful glare to Daisypetal before shaking out her pelt to regain her composure.
"We'll be running along now," she announced. "thank you both for entertaining my apprentice for me." With that, the ginger and white she-cat turned, beckoning to Moonpaw with a whisk of her tail.

"Don't work her too hard!" Badgerface called after them. Moonpaw trilled back in response, padding at Leafheart's heels up to the Entrance Tree. The two she-cats climbed in time with one another, traveling through the trees at a even pace as they made their way to the Tree Dome.

The trees' branches began to bend and wobble more as they came closer to the odd ones which surrounded the clearing. Moonpaw was the first to leap back to the forest floor, looking up as Leafheart came down gracefully to meet her. She never quite understood why the trees behaved differently in this part of the forest than the rest.

"Leafheart, why do the tree branches become more unstable around here?" She decided to ask.

Leafheart hummed thoughtfully. "Good question. I guess it has something to do with the soil. Maybe it's lacking in whatever trees need to be study. That's probably a question Mothsong could answer."

"Can I ask her when we get back to camp?"

"If you remember," Leafheart replied as they walked. "Today's training will be intense. Your mind might be too preoccupied by the time we go home."

Like yours? Moonpaw wanted to ask, holding her tongue instead. She was starting to get worried about Leafheart with how hard she'd been working herself. The ginger and white molly had changed in the past few of days. Since the elders had buried Flamepaw, Leafheart kept finding work that needed to be done. She was occupying her time to distract herself from grief--Moonpaw was sure of it. But it wasn't healthy. Perhaps later on, when she asked Mothsong her tree question, Moonpaw could also ask her to check on Leafheart. They were union-sisters. That made them honorary kin thanks to Leafheart's permanent mateship with Blazestar. Mothsong would surely be just as concerned about Leafheart as Moonpaw was. Moreso, even, as the clan's medicine cat. She'd want to make sure Leafheart wasn't neglecting her own needs in order to run away from her sorrow. She might even order Leafheart to have a meeting with the queens. That would do her some good,

Moonpaw decided internally.

"Alright, Moonpaw, we're here," her mentor interrupted Moonpaw's thoughts. "Go across the clearing and prepare to demonstrate the moves I tell you."

Moonpaw nodded, padding to one side of the Tree Dome and turning to face the other molly.

"Show me a front paw strike," Leafheart ordered. Moonpaw did as commanded, rushing towards her and throwing a paw forward, stretching her toes apart to pretend her claws were unsheathed to scratch.

"Duck."

Moonpaw dove beneath her mentor who stood on hind legs.

"Headbutt."

She pushed up from a crouch, shoving her head into Leafheart's belly. Moonpaw knocked her mentor back, waiting for the next command.

"Pounce and demonstrate the belly rake." Moonpaw tried to execute the move as well as she could, but found her movements faltering. Leafheart wasn't doing as much to defend herself as she normally would.

"Leafheart, what are we doing? Aren't you supposed to resist so I can learn how to counter?" Moonpaw asked, trying to hide the concern that seeped into her tone.

"We've gone over that enough," her mentor answered. "I need to test how well you do offensively. You need to be prepared, considering you might be chosen to join the battle tonight. I want to make sure you'll be ready."

"Wait, I was chosen?" Moonpaw was shocked to say the least.

Leafheart nodded. "Blazestar said he was strongly considering it. No one has seen you in a real fight yet. He wants to know how well

you'll do."

"Then...then I'll make hin proud! I'll show you I can make Treeclan proud!"

Leafheart smirked, eyes sparkling for the first time in days. "Good. Now, quit talking. Come at me again, and don't hold back."

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A cool fog settled along the forest floor as Treeclan's battle patrol made their way towards the Rubble Path. Their bodies lay low as they slunk through the underbrush, each warrior careful not to allow their opponents to become aware of their approach. A few cats followed from the trees above, Moonpaw chosen as one of the lucky few. Every now and then she looked downward towards silhouettes of her clanmates, anticipation fluttering in her chest. After today's training with Leafheart, Moonpaw had grown more confident in her fighting skills. That confidence made her a bit eager to test her abilities on real foes. She only hoped that she'd make her clan proud. This was her first real battle, after all. She needed to prove herself.

"The plan is simple," Robinspots told the tree dwelling cats as they moved-- Bluefang, Nightpaw, and Sagetail among them. "We will attack the approaching patrol first. Then the ground team will rush out when things get hairy. Knowing Oceanclan, they'll probably have some tricks up their pelts."

"They'll have reinforcements waiting, too," Sagetail reminded everyone.

Robinspots nodded. "Don't act until Thornberry gives word," the warrior's voice began to hush as they got closer to the Saggy Tree and end of the woods. "Understand?"

The other cats nodded. Moonpaw saw Thornberry pick his head up out of the fog, ears pricked in search of Oceanclan cats. After a heartbeat, the deputy disappeared again.

From her perch, Moonpaw could catch a whiff of the approaching
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patrol, moments before they became vaguely visible in the fog. There were six of them, Moonpaw was sure. A couple seemed nervous, from the scent. Still, arrogance drove the patrol past their boundaries and up the slope of stones into better view. They were aiming to spray and mark a new border. Moonpaw dug her claws into the branch she crouched on. Anger bubbled inside of her belly at the reveal.

Upon first sight of the Oceanclan cats, Thornberry gave the rallying cry; "Warriors attack!"

In an instant Treeclan's warriors sprang from the trees. Moonpaw landed on the shoulders of a sturdy ginger and white tom, snarling as she dug her claws into his back. The dark ginger tom hissed, whipping his head from side to side trying to get a look at his attacker. Teeth snapped at Moonpaw's paws, but she avoided being bit. She took one paw and smacked it against her opponent's head, trying to disorient him. But it didn't work. Instead the tom dropped to a crouch and rolled, flinging Moonpaw off his back.

Moonpaw leaped away before she was crushed by his weight, arching her back as he stood up to face her. The warrior charged, throwing a front paw strike towards her muzzle, successfully scratching before she could jolt away. Moonpaw squeaked, throwing a front paw blow in return. In response, the ginger and white tom threw himself onto her, trying to push her to the sand covered soil below them. But before he could, some cat knocked into the warrior, throwing him away. Moonpaw sat up to look at who had saved her. Hazepaw! She recognized his fluffy white pelt in a heartbeat. Though she was grateful and relieved for his assistance, she felt a little bad being rescued by him. Hazepaw should be showing loyalty for his own clan, fighting on their side instead of wasting time saving the enemy. She *was* his enemy, even if in secret they were good friends. If any of his clanmates noticed what he'd done, they'd grow suspicious.

"My bad," she heard Hazepaw gruff to the ginger and white warrior, playing off his tackle as a mistake. To back him up, Moonpaw jumped the white apprentice, tussling with him on the floor. Though she scratched, she made sure her strikes were light.

"You're a mouse-brain," she chided him. "What do you think you're doing!?" She pushed a paw against his cheek.

"What do you think?" Hazepaw growled, kicking his legs. To anyone listening, their banter may sound vicious.

"Thank you. But don't try that again. You'll get in trouble," Moonpaw leaned to whisper in his ear as she managed to hold Hazepaw down, belly up. She gave him a few soft kicks to his underside then pushed him away with a hiss. Hazepaw rose back onto his paws, just in time to be barreled over again by Nightpaw. He yowled, and Moonpaw drew back in surprise. The smokey black she-cat sliced her claws across Hazepaw's shoulder, while Hazepaw fought to push her away.

"Oh!" She chirped suddenly, a dark grin on her face. "I know you! You're the cat I've been scenting around here so often."

Moonpaw gasped at Nightpaw's announcement, ears drawing back. Did that mean she'd discovered Moonpaw's scent, too? Before Nightpaw could blurt it out, Moonpaw threw herself onto a blue-gray warrior, trying to get tossed.

Like a piece of moss, the cat flung Moonpaw away, right in the direction of Nightpaw. Moonpaw made sure she slammed into her, the two of them tumbling halfway down the Rubble Path from the impact. Hazepaw managed to escape back into battle, disappearing over the top of the cliff face.

"Fox-dung!" Nightpaw cursed at Moonpaw, getting back to her paws. "Watch where you're going!"

"Sorry! Next time I'll try landing on a more convenient cat," Moonpaw snarked back, standing up with a shake of her pelt. Just as the pair recovered from their fall, more Oceanclan warriors were upon them; reinforcements, ascending from the beach like birds into the sky. Just as Blazestar predicted. Luckily, Treeclan had their own. As Moonpaw and Nightpaw surged forward to meet the newcomers, Treeclan's ground team came to join them.

Galestorm was the first warrior to appear, biting the neck of a thick

brown tabby to immediately disarm him. Though the cat wasn't so easily defeated, flailing in the large she-cat's grip before playing dead to be released. Galestorm dropped him and turned, only to be ambushed by the same tom a heartbeat after. Fogpaw came along, tearing the enemy warrior off of his kin. He raked his claws along the cat's flanks, earning a yowl from the tom. He twisted his body around, trying to bite the apprentice. But his pelt was too thick for the warrior's teeth to penetrate.

Moonpaw moved aside as Spruceleap came over, only to be intercepted by a silver spotted she-cat who'd followed at a clanmate's side. Silverdrop, Moonpaw recognized her from her very first patrol as an apprentice. She'd seemed so silly then, but now in battle she proved herself to be a fierce warrior.

She caterwauled as she came upon Moonpaw, rising onto her hind legs to fall upon her. Moonpaw stood to meet her, slipping on a loose stone beneath her paw. With a surprised yelp, Moonpaw fell onto the rocky cliffside, narrowly avoiding the pounce of her enemy. Though she did not come away uninjured. Her paw twisted slightly, and she was cut by the sharp edges of the rocks along her underbelly and chin. Moonpaw groaned, trying to stand. But she was pressed down by the weight of yet another Oceanclan cat. This time it was a young tom, with white fur and dark gray tabby patches. He laughed at her pain, pushing her back down against the stones. He bit her ear, hard enough to draw blood. Moonpaw yowled, bucking her rear to get him away. The tom went flying down the slope, landing on his back. He growled as he recovered, making his way back to her.

"Oh you little twig-brain!" He spat, pelting towards her. Moonpaw arched her back, hissing at the other apprentice as he approached. She stood up on her back legs, caging him beneath her body. She forced him down to the stones, biting his scruff and yanking. The younger tom cried out, trying to wiggle away. Moonpaw kept her grip firm, determined to get him to surrender. After a few attempts to get the older molly off, the apprentice submitted, going limp. Moonpaw worked quickly to toss him away, chasing him the rest of the way down the Rubble Path for good measure. She watched him scamper back onto the beach, a few of his clanmates not far off.

They fled back to the safety of their camp, and Moonpaw let out a triumphant caterwaul as they went.

Thrill and adrenaline shocked through her system like lightning. She'd never realized battle would be so exhilarating! Training was always so monotonous, it couldn't compare to the real thing. Today Moonpaw developed a better appreciation for fighting. Smiling, the silver and white she-cat returned to the battle, picking her way up the Rubble Path to throw herself at another cat. She landed on another apprentice, with wiry black fur and a short muzzle. This must be Urchinpaw, she figured, remembering the way Hazepaw described him. He was already injured, the scent of blood strong from his neck and face. Moonpaw gave him a few more wounds to remember Treeclan by, sending him off with a rough kick. Urchinpaw whimpered, following what looked to be some of the last of his clanmates. The only few cats who remained were Sandybreeze, Oceanclan's deputy, and Wavestar, who watched the last of the fight at the bottom of Rubble Path.

"Retreat!" He commanded, trying to summon his deputy back to him.

"No! Oceanclan won't be defeated!" Sandybreeze swore, fighting with Thornberry. It didn't seem like she'd noticed her other clanmates fleeing.

"Why are you doing this?" Thornberry questioned with a growl. "You have the rest of your territory back. You don't need Rubble Path!"

"Oceanclan always needs more land!" Sandybreeze spat. Thornberry through his frustration thrusted the other deputy away with all his might. Her paws scraped across the earth, leaving skid marks behind in her wake. She was trying to stand her ground, to be unmovable. But behind all his fluff Thornberry was pure muscle. He managed to get Sandybreeze to the edge of the cliff and push her off balance, sending her tumbling partway down the rocky slope. Sandybreeze yelped each time her body thumped against a stone before she managed to stop her own momentum. She rose shakily, then finally heeded her leader's command, following him deep into Oceanclan territory. Thornberry threw his head back and let out a

keening caterwaul of victory, the rest of Treeclan's patrol adding their voices to the song. Excitement crackled through Moonpaw's pelt electrically. The taste of victory was sweeter than she ever could have imagined. So this is what it's like to win a battle! She realized, lifting her tail. Around her, Moonpaw clanmates commended the younger cats for their hard work. Then, each began to make their way back into the woods.
Moonpaw looked down from her place at the edge of Rubble Path. She thought she saw another cat approaching again. Her hackles raised, prepared to fight. But in a heartbeat she relaxed, realizing it was only her imagination. Moonpaw looked on just a couple moments more before following behind one of the warriors.

"That'll teach Oceanclan a lesson they won't soon forget!" Bluefang laughed as he padded alongside Beetlenose from the ground team.

"They won't be coming back here anytime soon," the black spotted tom responded.

Yeah, I hope so, Moonpaw found herself agreeing. She spared one more glance towards the beach, looking for any sign of Hazepaw. But he was nowhere to be seen, likely driven away just as the rest of his clanmates were. For a heartbeat, Moonpaw was glad.